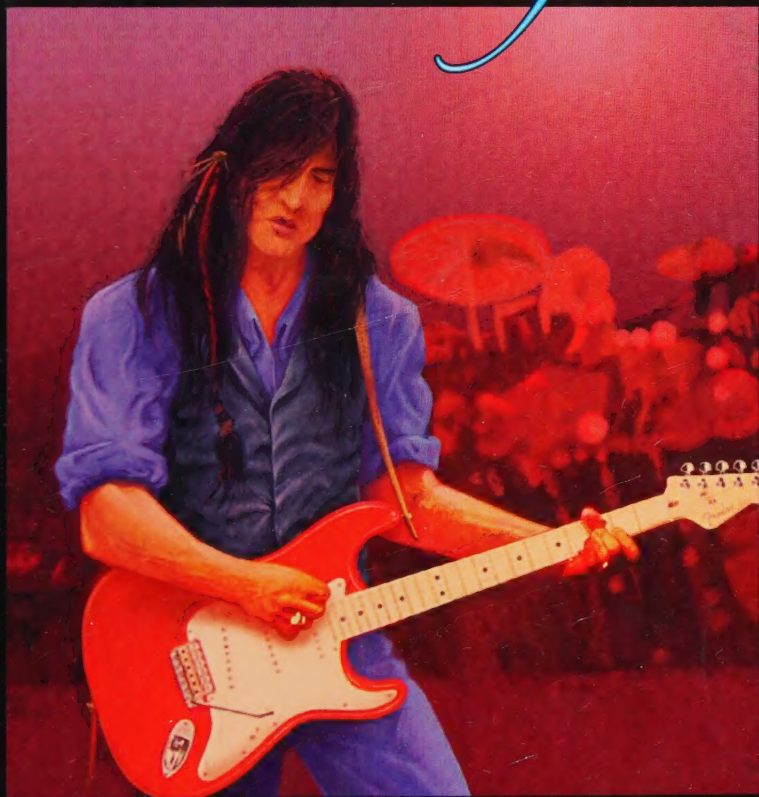
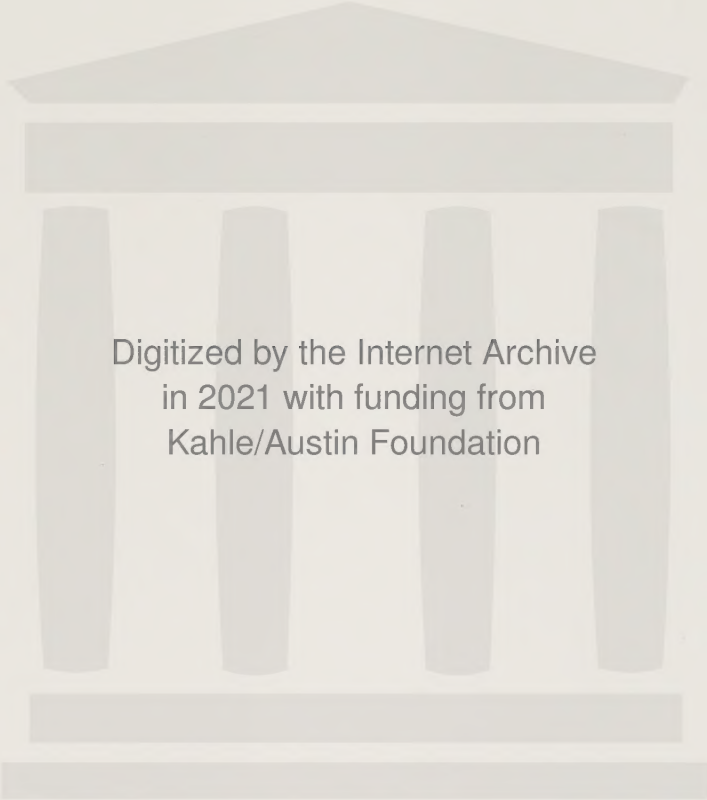


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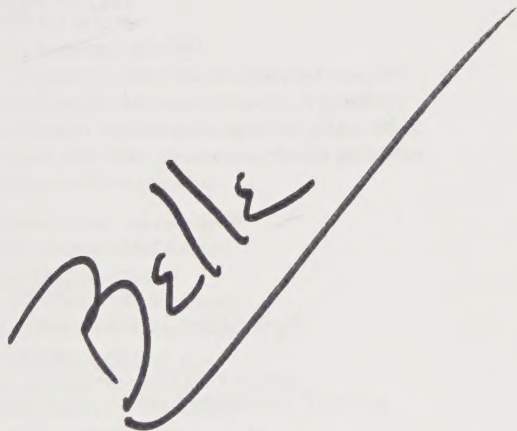


Lakota Man
by Magnolia Belle



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BLACK WOLF: LAKOTA MAN



By Magnolia Belle

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Note for Librarians: A cataloguing record for this book is available from Library and Archives Canada at www.collectionscanada.ca/amicus/index-e.html
ISBN 1-4120-6866-5



Printed in Victoria, BC, Canada. Printed on paper with minimum 30% recycled fibre. Trafford's print shop runs on "green energy" from solar, wind and other environmentally-friendly power sources.

TRAFFORD
PUBLISHING

Offices in Canada, USA, Ireland and UK

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

This book is dedicated to:

- my family, who loves me no matter what
- my friends at the Voices of Reason forum, whose encouragement and faith in this project made this possible
- "*Los Lonely Boys*" Henry, Jojo and Ringo Garza, who inspired this flight of fancy, and their incredible fans.

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*"This woman's heart is not a toy for you to play with, little boy.
Your player's lines, your hit and run, leave me cold;
leave you alone."*

CHAPTER I

LOOKING FOR A TOWN

CHAPTER 1

LOOKING FOR MR. TIDWELL

She took a few slow steps towards him, holding his gaze. As if finally making up her mind about something, she took the last two steps quickly and leaned in to whisper, “You look like someone...” she paused for a moment, trying to find her courage, “...like someone who could use a kiss.”

She stepped back one pace and looked into his eyes again. He looked annoyed. After a long silence, he mumbled, “Okay. So do it.” He was mocking her — daring her. Her eyes narrowed slightly at the challenge. She moved closer and then, tilting her head and closing her eyes, she kissed him lightly, sweetly on the lips.

Caleb had never seen her before, but he felt her kiss — soft, sweet, delicious. Stunned, he dropped his arms to his sides, unable — no, unwilling — to stop her.

* * *

A minute earlier, Sara had walked into the recording studio waiting room — where several young men were sprawled — her high heels click-clacking on the tile floor as she approached. “Excuse me,” she had asked. “Have any of you seen Mr. Tidwell? Do you know where he is?” Two of the men shook their heads. The third, reading an old copy of a music magazine, mumbled, “Uh, nope,” and returned his attention to it.

It was then that she had seen the strong similarities between them. “*Brothers*,” she thought. They looked Native American, with beautiful, copper skin and jet-black hair. All of them were dressed in jeans and T-shirts. One had an old jacket on as well. They looked bored and restless.

All four had looked at her as she entered. She was a tall woman, almost 5' 11" in her stocking feet. Her long, dark, wavy hair cascaded to her waist. She was wearing a short black skirt and a light blue blouse — almost as blue as her eyes — tied at the waist.

“Okay, thanks anyway,” she had smiled. As she turned to leave, she had looked carefully at Caleb, standing in a doorway, leaning one shoulder against the doorjamb, his arms folded across his chest. He was tall, at least 6' 4". He wore his long hair loose and it spilled across his shoulders and down his chest. His jeans were well-worn and his boots scuffed. Something in his eyes made her stop and study his face for a moment. There was something there — something she recognized.

He had jerked his head once upwards at her, looking annoyed as if to say, “*What are you lookin' at?*”

And now, he found himself sharing a kiss with a complete stranger. Without a word, she smiled, then turned and walked out of the room.

Caleb watched her leave. He wanted to run after her, but he just *stood* there and watched her leave. Turning back, he found his brothers staring at him in wordless amazement. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "She's crazy, *misúŋ*¹. It's nothin.'" But he knew he was lying. Something in his well-guarded heart had just thawed.

"Mr. Tidwell. I am so sorry I'm late." Her voice floated around the corner back to the waiting room.

"No problem, Sara. We've got you set up in Studio B. Come on back."

"Sara," Caleb thought to himself as the voices drifted away. Before he had time to reflect any further, a door opened into the hallway and the sound engineer he and his brothers had been waiting for walked in.

* * *

The recording studio — a large rectangular building, with a reception area and an adjoining waiting room just inside the front doors — was new territory for the Black Wolf Brothers, who had only recently signed on with the national Sonica label. To the rear of the reception area, two long hallways stretched front-to-back through the building, while two shorter hallways crossed the building, left-to-right. A drawing of the layout of the building's hallways looked somewhat like a number sign (#). The center of the building contained six recording studios; A-C opening onto one long hallway and D-F opening onto the other. The perimeter contained a variety of small offices, conference rooms and restrooms. An open lounge area sat in the middle of the back wall.

The Black Wolf brothers had been in Studio C for a short time when

¹ Lakota term for 'younger brother' [mee-SUNG]

it became clear that Caleb, the oldest at 24, was not focused on his work. As lead guitarist, lead vocalist and one of the two main songwriters in the Black Wolf Band, he needed to be paying attention.

Matthew, the 23 year old, looked up from his keyboard. "Hey, *čhiyé*². The rest of us are going to B-flat. Where are you headed?"

"Sorry, sorry. Take it from the top." Caleb shook his head and concentrated on the guitar. But, before he realized it, he was remembering those unbelievably soft lips kissing him and then kissing him again in instant replay. He blocked the memory out of his mind and focused once again on the task at hand.

He made it successfully through a few bars, when out of nowhere, those luscious blue eyes "*Caleb?*" were peering into his, smiling at him. Her voice "*Caleb?*" was whispering in that dulcet tone of hers, right next to his ear, sending a delicious tingle "*Caleb?*" down his spine. And he still had her scent on him. "CALEB!!"

"WHAT!" he shouted back at Jay, the second youngest of the brothers at 20.

"Where are you, man? I've been talking to you for the past two minutes." Jay thumped a string on his bass guitar in frustration.

"Guys, I'm sorry. Let's try it again and I'll stay with it, I promise."

Joaquin, the youngest at 18 and the drummer, shot a look at Matthew like he didn't quite believe Caleb.

However, true to his word, Caleb stayed focused for a few hours. They were close to the end of a track when he saw HER walk past the long narrow window in the studio door. All chance of further concentration was shot. In his mind, he was back out in the waiting room, reliving the kiss.

² Lakota term for 'older brother' [chee-YAH]

"Oh, I give up!" Jay fumed as Caleb missed yet another chord change. "What is with you today?"

"Oh, that's easy enough to guess," Joaquin taunted and then made kissing noises in the air.

"I'm sorry. Look, let me take a break and clear my head." Caleb set his guitar in its stand. "I'm gonna get something to eat in the lounge. Anyone want anything?"

"Yeah," Joaquin said, "bring me a soda."

"Okay, *misúŋ*, one soda coming up." Caleb walked out of Studio C and turned in the direction he had seen Sara walk, hoping he would find her. When he turned the hall corner and saw her sitting at the lounge table, deeply concentrating on her work, he stopped.

"Just walk over to the machines and if she says something, then talk to her. Relax," he told himself as he stood there, trying to make himself move. *"Man, she really rattled your cage! Come on, you can do this."* He willed himself to walk slowly across the floor to the snack machine in as nonchalant a manner as possible. He was watching her out of the corner of his eye, but she hadn't looked up, hadn't seen him. *"Oh, well,"* he thought to himself as he fed quarters into the machine. *"I tried."*

She was called back to her studio and had left the room by the time he turned around.

* * *

The next day Caleb watched the hallways for her. His distraction was evident to everyone trying to work with him. Finally, in the evening, he was standing in the hallway with a sound engineer, when

Sara walked by with two other people.

“Who is that?” Caleb asked.

“Who?” The sound engineer turned to look behind him.

“That woman.”

“Oh, that’s Sara Bradford.”

“The blues singer?” Caleb had heard of her and had admired her work.

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know she was using this studio.”

“She just started recording here a few months ago. Now, what about the reverb in the chorus?” Their discussion turned back to work.

* * *

It was Caleb’s turn to be in the lounge, sitting at the table with his brothers. Quin³ was joking around with Matthew and Jay, but Caleb was unusually silent. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sara walking towards them down the hall. Of the four brothers, he was the only one who could see her from his chair. He suddenly laughed like Quin had just said the funniest thing he’d ever heard. Quin looked at his oldest brother, puzzled.

“It wasn’t *that* funny, *čhiyé*.”

Caleb was too busy ‘not’ looking at her to defend himself. He pushed his chair out and leaned back, crossing his legs, making sure his long hair swung out with the motion. Sara turned the corner and walked past their table, smiling down at them.

“Hello, again,” she said brightly.

³ Quin – nickname for Joaquin, pronounced “keen”

“Oh, I get it,” Quin rolled his eyes.

“Hello,” Matthew said, turning in his chair to watch her walk to the vending machines. While her back was to them, he gestured, making the sign for ‘hot.’ Caleb raised one eyebrow and nodded in silent agreement. She picked up her soda and turned around.

“Join us,” Matthew invited her.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to impose,” she said demurely.

“Impose! Impose!” Matthew grinned as he pushed a chair back for her.

“Okay. Thanks. I could use a break.” She sat down in the offered chair and opened the can.

“I’m Matthew,” he introduced himself. “And this is Quin and Jay and Caleb.” Quin and Jay nodded their greeting.

“Hi. I’m...”

“Sara Bradford, blues artist extraordinaire,” Caleb finished for her, looking directly into her remarkable blue eyes. He had been studying her. Natural red and gold highlights shone in her dark brown hair. He liked it. Her hair and dark lashes were in stark contrast to her ivory skin. He noticed she was wearing diamond post earrings. And her lips...

“You’re Caleb?” she asked. When he nodded, she said, “Please, let me apologize for yesterday. I don’t know what got into me.”

“Don’t you dare,” Caleb smiled. “You made my day.”

Matthew had thought about asking Sara out, but there was too much heat flying between her and Caleb. He didn’t stand a chance.

“Sara Bradford, huh? I love your work,” Matthew said as he stood

up to get another soda. He hadn't gotten three steps towards the machine when Caleb stood up and swaggered around the table. He sat down in Matthew's chair and leaned over, elbows on knees, towards her.

"So, Sara, ever heard of Black Wolf?"

"Black Wolf?" She slowly shook her head as she tried to recall.

"No, sorry. Why?"

"'Cuz we're the Black Wolf Band," Quin explained.

She looked them over a little closer. "Rock or R&B, I'd imagine."

"Some of both," Jay spoke for the first time since she had joined them.

"Yeah. We just signed with Sonica." Caleb tried to sound nonchalant. He wanted her to know they were on equal footing.

"Oh, congratulations." She didn't seem overly impressed. Caleb was used to having women fawn over him whenever he bragged about that.

Matthew came back to the table, scowling at Caleb, and sat down in Caleb's old chair.

Caleb reached for Sara's hand. "Listen. How would you like to grab something when we're done here tonight?"

"Grab something? Like what?"

"Like me," he smirked, confidently. She pulled her hand back and stood up.

"No thanks. I don't date boys." The disdain in her voice was clear as she walked back down the hall.

Caleb held his head, face down, in his hands. That stung a little. He

usually had no trouble getting a date. He was, after all, very handsome.

"Oooo. *Burn!*" Quin said once he thought she was out of earshot.

"Does that usually work for you?" Jay asked incredulously. "I mean, c'mon!"

Matthew got up and walked over to Caleb, thumping him on his head. "You are a real class act. You know that? 'Like me,'" he mimicked in falsetto.

Sara walked down the hall, thinking about Caleb. His hair was glossy and fine. He had the most amazing dark-chocolate eyes she had ever seen. He had a strong face, a strong body, a strong voice. But the man was so cocky, so arrogant. She regretted kissing him now. Caleb could easily become a problem. Just as she reached the door, she heard Quin's 'Burn!' from down the hall. She grinned and stepped into Studio B to wrap up that day's work.

CHAPTER 2

REWRITES

The next time that Caleb and Sara saw each other, he was standing in the recording studio parking lot next to his old truck in the middle of an argument. Janice angrily looked up into his eyes. She was easily a foot shorter than he was. They looked odd together with Janice's head tilted back to look up at him.

"But I only need a hundred dollars," she pleaded. "It's for something to wear to your show!"

"No."

"*Niño*, don't you want me to look good in the front row? Show everybody how you take care of your girl?"

"Not for a hundred bucks, I don't." He looked away, disgusted. Janice was always after money or new clothes or something, and money was tight. They might be recording a CD, but they certainly hadn't 'sold' any yet. She apparently didn't understand basic eco-

nomics. Besides, she wasn't his girl, just someone he slept with once in a while.

Caleb heard a car door slam and, looking over his shoulder, saw Sara glance across at them as she walked to the studio. He leaned down and gave Janice a long kiss. When he looked back up, Sara was already inside. He hoped she had noticed. He could get a girl anytime he wanted. She wasn't so special.

Janice looked surprised when he let her go. "Does this mean I get the money?" she asked hopefully, as he turned and headed for the building.

"No!" he said over his shoulder. Janice got into her car and slammed the door as loudly as she could, to register her protest.

That evening, Sara was working on a song rewrite. She bought herself a soda and spread her sheet music across the lounge table. Something wasn't quite right in the chorus and she was scribbling quarter notes and eighth notes like a crazy woman. She closed her eyes and kept a steady "one – two – three – four, one – two – three – four" beat with the tip of her pencil while she worked on the cadence. Sara heard someone walk slowly into the lounge and jingle pocket change. She opened her eyes slightly, still concentrating on her task, only to see Caleb at the vending machine.

He reached down, got his bag of chips, and turned around. She caught his eye, smiled, and looked down at her notes.

"May I?" he asked.

"Sure." She looked up, wondering what corny line he would try on her this time. He sat down, reached across the table and turned a page around to read it.

“Hmm. Rewrites. I *hate* rewrites.”

“Yeah, me too.”

He stuffed a chip in his mouth while he studied her music. “Know what your problem is?” he asked after a moment.

“With the music, or with me in general?”

He cocked his head and laughed once. “With the music.”

“Okay, what?”

Caleb moved his chair closer to hers, so they could both see the paper. “Right here.” He picked up a pencil and began notating. She studied his face while he wrote. She wished he were a little less immature, since she was definitely attracted to him.

“What do you do in the band?” she asked, ignoring her work. “You never said.”

Caleb put the pencil down and turned to face her. He took a breath to answer, but she stopped him.

“No, wait. Let me guess.”

“Okay.” He grinned.

“Give me your left hand.” She knew better, but she couldn’t help but flirt a little.

“What?” His brow crinkled.

“Give me your left hand,” she repeated. When he held out his hand, she turned it palm-side up. Holding it in her left hand, she began running the fingers of her right hand up and down his. His hand had strength in it; the fingers were long and well-defined.

Her touch was mesmerizing to him. Caleb liked her perfume and the nearness of her. He forced himself to break her spell. “Give

up?" he asked.

"Nope. I say you play guitar — probably lead, but could be bass."

"Now, how do you figure that?" Caleb deliberately left his hand in hers.

"You're right-handed, right?"

"Right."

"So a right-handed guitarist would have calluses on the fingertips of his left hand. And, brother, you've got calluses." She touched the tips of his fingers for emphasis.

"Good guess. But you're only part right. I'm also lead vocals..." Before he could say more, he caught sight of Janice walking down the hall. He knew she wanted to bug him for money and he wasn't in the mood — especially not in front of Sara. Janice hadn't seen him yet. He jerked his hand out of Sara's.

"Do me a favor, would you?" he asked quickly, as he jumped to his feet. "If anyone comes looking for me in the next thirty seconds, you haven't seen me, okay?" He didn't wait for her answer as he ducked into an adjoining hallway and escaped.

Sara barely had time to understand what he had asked when Janice walked up to the table.

"Excuse me," Janice said, "but I'm looking for my boyfriend, Caleb Black Wolf. Have you seen him?" Janice was young, about 5' 4," slim build, cute as a button, but there was a hard look in her eyes. The words "gold digger" came to Sara's mind when she looked at her.

"I'm sorry," Sara shook her head and then returned to work on her music. She recognized Janice from earlier and wondered why Caleb

felt such a need to run.

“Okay, thanks.” Janice turned down another hallway and stopped someone else, asking the same question and receiving the same answer. When Janice left, Caleb came back to the lounge.

“Thanks.” He flopped down on the chair next to her.

“Sure. But why do I feel like I’m aiding and abetting a felon?” Her question was serious.

“It’s nothing like that,” Caleb laughed. “She just wants money. I’ve already told her no, but it doesn’t do any good. She’ll bug me and bug me until I cave.”

“You two must have a wonderful relationship,” Sara said sarcastically.

“Not really a relationship. Just someone I know.”

Sara didn’t say anything. Those two obviously needed help.

“Sara,” Caleb frowned, “I’d like another shot. I mean, I came across badly the other night. I’m not really a jerk. Would you please come to dinner with me tomorrow night?” His eyes softened. “Please?”

Sara knew he was being sincere. She even appreciated the effort, but it wasn’t enough.

“I’m sorry, Caleb. But the woman you say you’re *not* having a relationship with told me that you’re her boyfriend. That sounds like trouble I don’t need.” She stood up, gathering her papers, “But thanks for asking.” After a quick smile, she left him sitting at the table by himself. As she walked through the lobby, she saw Janice come back in, looking determined.

“Say, that guy you’re looking for?” Sara asked. “He’s in the

lounge."

"Okay. Thanks." Janice hurried off to find him.

* * *

Caleb meant to get there earlier. He knew from the flyer that Sara's set started at 9:00. He hurried into the club at 9:10, flustered by traffic. Once he found a place towards the back and sat down, he ordered a beer and tried to relax. He hoped, by coming to one of her shows, that he could make some kind of headway with her.

Sara was center stage, performing acoustically, with only her Martin guitar and her voice. That was enough — more than enough — to keep her listeners enraptured. She wore a long, brick-colored, broom skirt and a tan blouse with a gold chain for a belt. Brown suede boots completed her outfit. With her long curls sweeping across her shoulders and down her back, she reminded Caleb of a beautiful, exotic gypsy.

Her blues filled the room, telling a story about new love found, then lost. She took the audience through rivers of weeping and whiskey-soaked heartbreak; led them through nights of passion and mornings of regret. Wherever she went, they all willingly followed.

When her set was over, Caleb started to walk to the table reserved for the musicians, but stopped. A young man was already there. When Sara walked off the stage, the man stood up to greet her. She stepped into his embrace as he kissed the top of her head. Caleb turned and left, never telling her he was there. It was too late. He was too late. She already had someone.

"Sis, you were great!" Steven said, after he kissed Sara's head.

“Thanks.” She smiled. “I am so glad you could come. I don’t know anyone else here tonight.”

“Glad to. Wanna grab some pizza or something?” the perpetually hungry young man asked.

“Sure. Let me get my things and we’ll go.” Once she was organized, she walked outside with Steven and did a double take as she saw what looked like Caleb’s truck driving away. She wondered and then, shrugging her shoulders, forgot about it.

CHAPTER 3

THE DATE

“Janice is killing me, *misúŋ*.” Caleb sat with Matthew in the living room of the house the brothers shared. The others were asleep. But, Caleb had women on his mind and he kept Matthew up talking.

“More money?”

“Yeah, that.” Caleb sounded like there was more.

“That and what?” Matthew was the second oldest of the family and had a head for management. While Caleb kept the band focused musically, Matthew kept their business affairs in order. He was also Caleb’s ‘go-to’ guy whenever Caleb was troubled.

“Sara thinks Janice is my girlfriend. Janice told her she was,” he took a deep breath, “and she might have seen me kissing Janice the other day.”

THE DATE

Matthew laughed sarcastically. “And yet, she jumped to that conclusion! The nerve of some people!”

“You’re *not* helping.” Caleb sounded frustrated.

“Well, *čhiyé*,” Matthew shook his head, “you keep shooting yourself in the foot. How am I supposed to help when you do that?”

When Matthew got no answer, he asked, “Besides, why would you care what Sara thinks?”

“I dunno. I just do.”

“Uh oh. I’ve seen that look before. It never ends well.”

“Now you know why I’m worried.” Caleb drummed his fingers on the arm of the sofa.

“This wouldn’t be ‘cuz she turned you down, would it? You know — ‘you want what you can’t have?’”

“Maybe.” Caleb shrugged his shoulders and then shook his head. “But I don’t think so. I just don’t know where to go from here. She thinks I’m a jerk from the first time I asked her out. She thinks I have a girlfriend from the second time.”

“Wait a minute. She shot you down *twice*?” Matthew was truly astonished. “Man, you’re losing your touch.”

“Frightening, isn’t it?” Caleb scowled. “What’s worse, I think she’s seeing someone else.”

Matthew stood up, laughing. “I think you’ve met your match. Maybe even your better. Want my advice? Let her go, *čhiyé*. Let her go.” He yawned and turned towards the hallway. “If you’re done bending my ear, I’m turning in.”

“Okay. Night.”

Matthew clicked off the living room light on his way to his room, leaving Caleb in moonlit shadows. Caleb knew he had to end it with Janice. As for Sara, he wasn't sure how he was going to get around her boyfriend.

* * *

A few days later, through her studio office window, Sara saw Caleb walking with Jay across the parking lot. Janice walked into view and threw her arms around Caleb, but he pulled them away and stepped back. His gestures were clear. He was not happy to see her. Sara wondered if maybe he had been telling the truth about Janice. It certainly looked like it. Jay and Caleb turned towards the building, leaving Janice stamping her foot, her hands on her hips, furious. Sara was glad she couldn't hear what was being said.

That evening, as she was leaving, Caleb stopped Sara in the hallway.

"I'm giving this one more try," he said determinedly, almost angrily. "I do *not* have a girlfriend and I am *not* a jerk. I swear. And I know you're seeing someone else, but I don't care!"

She sounded perplexed as she interrupted him. "I'm seeing someone else?"

"Aren't you? I saw you with him at the club the other night."

"You were there? Why didn't you say hello?"

"I started to, but he was there and I didn't want to barge in."

Sara laughed. "That was my brother, Steven. I would have introduced you to him."

Caleb felt foolish. "Your brother?" He paused while he considered

THE DATE

that information. "Okay. Then that makes this a little easier. Will you please have dinner with me? Please?"

She stood in front of him, looking into those gorgeous, brown eyes. Wondering if she needed to have her head examined, she heard herself say, "Yes. I'll have dinner with you. When?"

Caleb's eyes lit up in happy surprise. "You will?"

"Yes," she repeated. "When?"

"When? Um, how about tomorrow? No. Friday night?"

"Friday's good."

"Great. I'll see you then." Caleb turned and walked down the hall, looking for Matthew, to tell him the news. Sara opened her purse and pulled out a pen and paper. She wrote for a second, put her pen away and then waited. Caleb had turned the corner before he realized that he didn't have her phone number or know where she lived. He came back down the hall, only to see Sara leaning against the wall, waving a small piece of paper.

"Thanks. I might need this," he said sheepishly. As he took it from her, he kept walking, never breaking stride. His face flushed when he heard her giggle behind him.

* * *

Late that night, Caleb sat in his living room on the sofa, his feet propped up on the coffee table, his arms folded across his chest. Moonlight streamed through the windows, casting long shadows over the room. He couldn't sleep. Matthew came down the hall towards the open kitchen area for some water.

"What are you doing up?" he asked Caleb as he shuffled sleepily

past him.

"Just thinking," Caleb mumbled.

"'Bout what?" Matthew reached for a glass from the cupboard.

"Where to take Sara tomorrow."

Matthew filled the glass half full of water and turned to lean his back against the sink.

"Well," Matthew gulped some water and sat the glass on the counter, "where would you like to take her?"

"I don't know, *misúŋ*. Pizza? A fancy place? I can't decide."

Matthew walked over and sat down on the coffee table, facing his brother. "How much does it matter?"

"It matters." Caleb looked at his brother in the shadows. "For some reason, it matters."

"Well, then you already know what to do." Matthew rose to his feet, twisted his arm around to scratch the middle of his back, and padded barefooted back down the hall.

* * *

Caleb was ready, as ready as he could be, anyway. He had on his best jacket and slacks, the dinner reservations were made, the truck was gassed up and, after an afternoon of phone tag, he knew Sara would be waiting for him at her apartment at 8:00 sharp. He stood outside her doorway and, after one final check, he rang the doorbell.

"Caleb, the door's open," Sara's voice called out. "Come on in."

He opened the door and stepped into her living room. It wasn't large, but it was comfortable, not fussy. To his right was the kitchen. Ahead

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and to the left was a hallway leading to the rest of the apartment.

"I'm looking for an earring. I'll be right there," she called out again. After a few seconds, he heard footsteps in the hall. She walked into the room, smiling.

"Hi, you!" she said. "You look *good*!" She meant it, too. He had tied his hair into one long braid that hung neatly down his back. The jacket emphasized his broad shoulders and the way he carried himself.

Sara was wearing a short, rose-colored dress that accentuated her curves and bare shoulders. Her hair was piled loosely on top of her head, with curls cascading down the nape of her neck. As she seemed to walk in slow motion towards him, Caleb noticed the curls swaying in time to her gait. Ruby earrings caught the light, sparkling. The dress complemented her long legs and the way she walked. And her eyes — those incredible blue eyes — he knew he could easily get lost in them. All this he saw in the space of a few seconds.

Caleb had never had anyone actually 'take his breath away' before. He managed a smile as she gave him a welcoming hug. "You are beautiful," he murmured as he returned her hug.

"Why, thank you." She didn't realize the effect she was having on him. "Do we have time for a drink, or do we need to leave now to make our reservation?" she asked.

"Hmm," he glanced at his watch. "Better leave now."

"Okay." She picked up her purse and led him out the door.

The restaurant was crowded. Waiters hurried between tables while balancing trays of succulent dishes above their heads. Several peo-

ple turned to watch the striking couple follow the hostess to their table. Once seated, they ordered wine and studied the menu.

Caleb had worried about what they would talk about after they ordered. He needn't have.

"So, how many brothers and sisters do you have?" Sara asked as she bit into a bread stick.

"Well, you've met my three brothers, kind of. I also have two sisters — all of them younger than me."

"You mean there are six kids in your family and one of them is *you*? Your poor mother!"

Caleb laughed out loud. "Yeah, we were a handful. Actually, we still are. What about your family?"

"Well, you already know about my brother, Steven. He's younger than me and is in college. He's the only sibling I've got."

"Does your family live here in Austin?" Caleb asked.

"No. Close. San Marcos. My brother is going to the University of Texas here in Austin, though." She paused to sip her wine. "And your family, where are they?"

"Here in Texas, too. My dad is retired military. His last post was Ft. Hood. Mom was tired of moving, so they just stayed there. Most of my relatives are in South Dakota, though. We're from the Lakota tribe."

"Lakota? I'm not sure I've heard of that tribe."

"It's part of the Sioux Nation."

"Oh, really?" Sara said, finding that interesting. "I'm a little bit of all things Celtic, with a dash of French and a pinch of German

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thrown in for good measure.”

Dinner was just about over and going very well when Caleb looked up at Sara and caught sight of someone behind her. His face changed. He was not happy.

CHAPTER 4

JANICE

Hello, Caleb,” a woman’s voice sounded from behind Sara.
“Hello.” Caleb rose from his seat.

“Where have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you, but you never got back to me. You bad boy!” Caleb’s jaw muscles clenched. “I called your place earlier and Quin said you’d be here.” (Caleb made a mental note to speak to Joaquin later.) The woman stepped around the table where Sara could see her.

“Sara, this is Janice, an *old* friend.” He sat down but didn’t offer Janice a seat.

“Yes, we’ve met,” Sara said, nodding towards Janice.

“An old friend?” Janice sounded surprised, ignoring Sara. “That’s not what you said last weekend at my place.” She laid her hand suggestively on his arm. Janice wasn’t giving up her potential meal

ticket without a fight. Caleb's dark eyes went even darker as he brushed her hand away.

Caleb looked across the table at Sara, trying to apologize with his eyes. He was relieved to see that she wasn't angry or upset, but rather slightly amused.

"Well, Janice, I'm sorry you came by for nothing." Caleb reached for Sara's hand and kissed it. "But, as you can see, I'm with Sara. So, goodbye."

"Don't tell me this is a *date*?" Janice wagged her finger between the two of them. "Oh, honey," she finally looked at Sara, "I thought you *knew* I'm his girl. I mean I told you at the studio."

Sara started to say something, but Caleb interrupted her.

"Janice, for the last time, you are *not* my girl. You never were."

"Oh, really?" She was getting louder and starting to make a scene. She put one foot in front of the other, shifted her weight back, folded her arms and cocked her head. Caleb recognized her fighting stance all too well. He let go of Sara's hand and, rising from the table, took Janice by the arm.

"I'll be right back," he said over his shoulder as he hurried Janice outside.

When he returned several minutes later, he apologized for the interruption.

"Goodness, she's a little spitfire," Sara commented. "Do you think she'll be back?"

"Not if she's smart," Caleb frowned. "But enough of her. Would you like coffee and dessert?"

"Coffee would be great. I'm too full for dessert."

They had just gotten their after-dinner coffee when Caleb asked, "Why did you kiss me?"

"What?" The question caught her off guard.

"At the studio, why did you kiss me? You didn't know me. You still don't."

"Well, that's a fair question and one I've been asking myself ever since I did it." Sara pensively stirred cream into her coffee. "There was a look in your eyes that I recognized. I've seen it in the mirror a thousand times."

"A look?" Caleb was confused. He just remembered being bored and slightly annoyed at being stared at.

"Yes. You looked bored. But underneath that was a look of someone who had given up. I know now that you were seeing Janice. But she isn't what you really want. You've given up on finding what you *really* want." She tilted her head and asked, "Is this making any sense?"

Caleb just nodded as he thought about what she was saying. He *had* been running fast and loose, careful not to get too close or stay too long with anyone. That only brought pain.

"And then," she continued, "underneath *that* look was one of sadness that you had let yourself give up. I just thought you needed a kiss, you know, to not give up. Besides," she smiled to break the serious mood, "I just like kissing good-looking strangers!"

Caleb laughed out loud. But he was wondering — truly wondering — how she already knew him so well.

"So, fair is fair," Sara said. "Why did you tell me to?"

He had been expecting this. "Besides the fact that a beautiful woman was making the offer?" he grinned. "Isn't that every man's fantasy?" She rolled her eyes at him. "Okay, I'll tell you. I was curious. I wanted to know if you'd actually do it, calling your bluff."

"Did you expect me to?"

"I didn't know what to expect. But, I'm glad you did."

* * *

It was a clear night. They stood in a willow tree's shadow outside the front door of her apartment building. The warm breeze made the long tendrils of the old tree sway lazily. Moonlight splashed across her shoulders and sparkled in her earrings.

"I had a lovely time, Caleb. Thank you for dinner."

Caleb looked at her intently, saying nothing.

"What?" Sara asked.

He leaned in beside her ear. "You look like someone who could use a kiss," he whispered, teasing her about their first encounter.

"Okay. So do it," she whispered, teasing back.

He held her face in his hands and leaned slowly towards her. He barely brushed his lips against hers as he looked into her eyes. Pulling her into his embrace, he closed his eyes, and kissed her again, taking his time. She wrapped her arms tightly around him, responding to his touch. His next kiss was intense, hungry, luscious. She felt his tongue gently touch her lips, just for a second, making her shiver.

After a moment, Caleb lifted his head and looked up to the night sky. He wanted desperately to be invited up to her bed.

Sara leaned her head against his shoulder, enjoying him, his arms, his presence. She lost track of time as they stood holding each other, sharing delicious kisses. Finally, reluctantly, she put her hands on his shoulders and stepped back.

"I'd better get going," she murmured. Sara looked into his eyes and gently touched his cheek with her fingertips. He had actually behaved himself. She was glad. Maybe there would be a second date.

"*Wakú kte*," he murmured.

"What?"

"That's Lakota for 'I'll see you again.'" With that, Caleb kissed her once more and walked her to the door.

* * *

Caleb walked into his house and threw his keys on the table by the door.

"I didn't expect to see you until tomorrow," Matthew said, looking up from the TV. "Was it that bad?"

"No. Actually, it went really well." Caleb took his jacket off and threw it on a kitchen island before he joined his brothers in the living room.

"Then why are you already home?" Quin asked, sprawled on the floor in front of the TV.

Caleb plopped down on the sofa and took his shoes off before he answered.

"Because, believe it or not, little brother, there are women out there

who don't fall into bed just because you buy them dinner."

"And it was just your rotten luck to find one of 'em," Quin chorled.

Caleb smirked at Quin and then asked, "Where's Jay? Still out with Betsy?"

"Yeah. Now *there's* someone who won't be in until tomorrow," Quin said with admiration.

"So, how was dinner?" Matthew pressed.

"Dinner was going fabulous — until Janice walked in. Thanks, Quin." Caleb picked up a shoe and threw it across the room at him.

"Ow! Hey, I didn't know." Quin rubbed his hip where the shoe landed.

"You did so! You just like making trouble." Caleb scowled at him.

"Was there trouble?" Quin wanted to know how effective he had been.

"Enough so that I had to take Janice outside before she made a scene. Don't *ever* do that again."

Joaquin saw that Caleb really was angry. "I'm sorry. I won't."

"Hey," Matthew interrupted them, "if you two can stop fighting, I want to ask you something. I know we're looking for a few more songs to go on the CD. I've got some lyrics I want to show you in the morning when Jay's here. If you like them, maybe we can use them."

"Sure. We'll take a look." Caleb nodded and then yawned. "I'm gonna turn in. Night."

"Night, *chiyé*," Quin said.

* * *

"Hi, Steven." Sara called her brother, even though she knew it was late.

"Hey, Sis. What's up?" He closed his chemistry book, glad for the interruption.

"Nothing. I just wanted to talk to you."

"Oh. You called this late to tell me nothing?"

"Well, I just got back from a first date."

"One of those," he grimaced. "I *hate* first dates. They're so awkward."

"Usually," she agreed. "This one wasn't too bad. His ex-girlfriend showed up, though."

Steven laughed out loud. "Oh, Sis, you sure know how to pick 'em."

"Well, if you're just going to laugh at me, I'm hanging up."

"Sorry. It's just too funny. I have to laugh."

"It *is* kinda ridiculous, isn't it?" She chuckled before she said, "I guess you need to get back to studying or sleeping or whatever it is you're up to at this time of night."

"Okay, Sis. Goodnight."

She hung up, smiling. Talking to her brother always made her feel better. Without knowing it, he helped her put things in perspective.

CHAPTER 5

LITTLE MISS KISS ME

The next morning, the brothers were in Studio C, where their equipment was set up.

“Let’s see it,” Caleb said, holding his hand out to Matthew. “Your song?”

“Oh, yeah. Here.” Matthew pulled a piece of paper out of his back pocket and spread it out on top of his keyboard.

Little Miss Kiss Me.

*Little Miss Kiss Me, walkin' down the hall
Sees a young man leaning up against a wall
Says, “I know we’re strangers, but it’s got to be like this.”
She reaches for his shoulders and gives him a big kiss.*

(Chorus:)

Woooo! Little Miss — Little Miss Kiss Me

Look over here and see

Little Miss — Little Miss Kiss Me

You've got to come kiss me!

Little Miss Kiss Me, dancin' to the beat

Has all the young men staring as she's turning up the heat.

Says, "I know that you don't know me," as she takes one by his hand,

"but I've got to have you kiss me. I hope you'll understand!"

(Chorus)

Little Miss Kiss Me, hangin' with the band

Sees a guitar player looking mighty grand

Says, "I know you're really busy and playing is your bliss,

But you've got to stop a moment while I steal a little kiss!"

(Chorus)

After Caleb read the lyrics he turned to stare at Matthew.

"I wonder what inspired this?" he asked.

"Like you don't know," Jay teased.

"Now, Caleb," Matthew said defensively, "before you throw this out, listen to the music behind it."

He switched on the keyboard and began playing a hard-driving rhythm. Joaquin jumped on his drums and picked up the beat. It went straight to the roots of rock. Caleb knew it would tear up a concert.

"This is good, Matthew. Really good." Caleb picked up his guitar and threw the strap across his shoulders. They went through the song again while Jay and Caleb worked out the bass tab and lead riffs. There were a few adjustments made to Matthew's original score, but they had a good working first draft within a few hours.

A few hours after that, while they were taking a break from recording, Caleb ran into Sara in the hall.

"Hi," Caleb smiled.

"Hi, yourself!" Even though she was in a hurry, Sara stopped to talk with him. "Busy?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm gonna kill me a sound engineer in about five minutes if he doesn't get the mix right."

Sara nodded her head in sympathy. "Say, Caleb, I wanted to let you know that I'll be out of town for a few days."

"Oh? What's up?" He reached out and pushed a stray curl away from her eyes. She enjoyed his act of familiarity.

"I've got to fly to Los Angeles tomorrow to do some promo work for the CD release."

"Oh, okay. Let me know when you get back. We'll do something."

"Okay. You've got my cell number. If anything comes up, call me." Before he could respond, she turned around and hurried down the hall.

* * *

She only had a few more hours of work to do before she needed to head for home and get ready for the trip. Sara decided to take a

quick break and grab a soda before making the final push. As she walked down the hall towards the lounge, she could hear Caleb and one of his brothers talking.

"You seeing Sara tomorrow night?" Quin asked as he pulled change out of his jeans pocket.

"No. She'll be in L.A. for a while," Caleb answered. He punched a button and watched his soda roll to the tray.

"Good. Since we've got some down time, I have an idea. Remember the place we played last month? There were some waitresses who looked pretty eager. Why don't we head over there? See if we can't get something going?"

"Oh, yeah. Maria! Count me in." Caleb liked Sara, but they had no special understanding. He could do as he pleased.

"I bet you don't have to buy this one dinner to get any action," Quin laughed as he picked his drink up.

"Counting on it," Caleb grinned. He and Quin turned around to find Sara standing behind them, waiting her turn at the machine.

"Sara!"

"Excuse me," she said, not looking at either one. "I'd like to get something to drink, please." She stepped between them and put her money in the slot.

"That probably sounded bad," Caleb said to her.

"You don't owe me any explanations." She picked up her drink and headed back down the hall. Caleb took a few steps after her to stop her.

"Wait."

"We hardly know each other, remember?" She frowned at him. "You might have told the truth about not having a girlfriend, but you lied about not being a jerk! Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got some things to wrap up before I leave for L.A." She smiled at him as if she had only overheard them discussing the weather. But inside, her heart sank. Now she knew what he was really about.

He watched her walk away, a sick feeling in his stomach. He had just blown it — again — and he knew it.

* * *

Joaquin checked his reflection in the mirror. He looked sharp, sharper than usual. The jeans were just tight enough, his shirt neatly pressed, his long hair gleaming loose across his shoulders. He thought about wearing a jacket, but changed his mind at the last minute. Clicking off the light in his bedroom, he walked down the hall into the living room.

"We ready to do this?" he asked his three brothers. Matthew stood up and picked up his hat from the coffee table.

"Yep, *misúñ*. Let's ride."

"You coming, Caleb?" Quin asked, looking down at him.

"No. You guys go on."

"But, I thought you wanted to come with us. There are some hot *chicas* just waiting for the Black Wolf boys."

"I know, but I've changed my mind. That'll just leave more *chicas* for you," Caleb grinned.

"This isn't about Sara hearing us, is it?" Quin asked.

"Kinda," Caleb admitted.

"Don't tell me you're already whipped." Quin sounded sincerely disappointed.

"Oh, for heaven sakes, just go!" Caleb ordered. He could barely explain it to himself, let alone to anyone else.

Quin sat down in the recliner to look at him. "I don't get it. You had one date with her — which you came back from early — and now this?"

"Yeah," Jay added, "what's up with that?"

"Look, guys, I'm trying to get some things figured out. That's all."

"Come on. Figure it out later. You need to cut loose tonight. We all do." Quin rose to his feet.

"You know you want to," Matthew enticed him. "It'll be fun. At least go and listen to the band."

"I've got a girl and I'm going," Jay added.

"Yeah, alright," Caleb agreed. "I can listen to the band."

They took two cars — just in case one of them got lucky — and within half an hour the four brothers walked in to the bar-and-grill. It was dark, loud and crowded. The band was playing a rehash of vintage rock. They weren't too good; they weren't too bad. The more the audience drank, the better the band sounded.

One of the waitresses Quin was interested in came to their table to get their order.

"Hi, baby!" Quin smiled, grabbing her around the waist. She adeptly stepped out of his reach and shook her head.

"What can I get you," she asked impatiently. It was a hectic night

and she had pulled a double shift because someone called in sick. She was tired, her feet hurt, and she had no time for his nonsense, whoever he was. After taking their orders for nachos, sodas and beer, she worked her way through the tables back to the kitchen.

“Better luck next time,” Matthew laughed at Quin. At first Quin looked crestfallen, but his face lit up in a few seconds.

“Oh, look,” he said excitedly as he turned to nod at a table of young lovelies. He was doing his best to look nonchalant. One of them smiled and waved at him. “I’ll be back.” He walked over to their table and, after a few words, led the prettiest one by the hand to the dance floor.

“Well, at least one of us is having fun,” Matthew said.

Caleb had been listening to the band, wishing they were better. Their vocalist sounded stoned — and probably was. What they lacked in talent they made up for in volume.

“Caleb?” He turned to see who was speaking to him. “Caleb, it’s me, Maria.” She put her hand on his shoulder and leaned down to speak over the din into his ear.

“Oh, hi!” He smiled at the beautiful woman. “I didn’t know you were working tonight.”

“Yeah, I get off in a few minutes, though.”

“That’s nice. At least you won’t have to listen to them much longer.” He pointed to the stage.

“Yeah, they’re not too good, are they,” she agreed. “Have you got plans later?”

“No. Why?”

"I'll stop by when my shift is over." She left, threading her way across the room with someone's order.

Twenty minutes later, she walked up to him and smiled. "Ready?"

Caleb stood up from the table and leaned in to shout into Matthew's ear. "I'm taking the truck. See you later."

Matthew waved once and watched the two of them walk to the exit. He shook his head, frowning. "*What is Caleb doing?*" he wondered. "*I thought he liked Sara.*"

"Where's he going?" Quin asked when he stopped by the table for a brief appearance.

"Maria," Jay said.

"Oh. Good. I was afraid he was going serious on us about Sara." Quin got pulled backwards by a young woman he had met a little while earlier. "Gotta go." He disappeared into the crowd.

Caleb and Maria stepped out into the parking lot.

"Oh, this is so much better," she sighed, throwing her head back, eyes closed. "Fresh air and no loud music." They walked a little further towards his truck when she stopped and turned to face him.

She put her arms around his neck and gave him a long kiss. "Your place or mine," she asked softly, smiling at him.

He looked at her, considering her question. This was how the game was played. And yet, this time, it bothered him. There was no preliminary anything, no date, no dinner, not even a conversation between them. This was what his life had become, full of Janices and Marias. They used him just as much as he used them, no one risking attachment or even a real friendship.

“Is something wrong?” she asked in response to his continued silence.

“No, nothing’s wrong. I’ll tell you what,” he pulled her arms down from around his neck. “Why don’t you go to your place and I’ll go to mine?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, Maria. I need to go.” He got in his truck and went home.

Caleb sat in his room, stereo playing, his mind full of Sara. A year ago, he would have laughed at himself now, worrying this much about what anyone thought of him. Was it new wisdom or a fear of being lonely that was driving this? He didn’t know. He was just sure that he wanted to know Sara better — and for her to know him. Was it too late? Had he already ruined it before it even got started?

He didn’t have the answers. There was no crystal ball to tell him what his future held. All he knew to do was to keep trying. Reaching into his jeans pocket, he pulled out a crumpled piece of paper with her phone number on it. He started to dial, but put the phone back down. No. He would wait until it was time for her to come home. He needed time to think about what to say. Whatever it was going to be, it needed to be just right. He couldn’t ruin another chance with her and he knew it.

There was a soft knock on Caleb’s door. It was after midnight.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me, *chiyé*,” Matthew said. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

Matthew opened the door and found Caleb propped up on his bed,

still dressed.

"Can't sleep?" Matthew asked.

"No. You just get in?"

"Yeah." He sat on the desk chair and swiveled to face Caleb. "I was kinda surprised to find you home. I thought you'd be with Maria."

Caleb made a face. "Yeah, well."

"Caleb, what are you doing?" Matthew was genuinely concerned.

"Are you playing Sara?"

"Am I playing Sara?" Matthew's question surprised him. "No."

"You sure? 'Cuz it looks like it from here. When I saw you leave with Maria tonight..."

"Nothing happened," Caleb said curtly.

"Maybe not. But you still left with her. I'm just saying that I like Sara. And I know you."

"And what?" Caleb asked, with a little heat in his voice.

"I think you could hurt her without trying real hard. I've seen you do it to others."

"You want to ask her out yourself? Is that it?"

"No, Caleb. I'm trying to tell you that she's different from the others you run with. Better somehow. And she deserves better than you stepping out with Maria. If it comes down to it — and it better not — I've got her back."

"And not mine." Caleb didn't like the inference. Without another word, Matthew rose to his feet, gave Caleb a warning look and walked out. Caleb frowned. Why *had* he left with Maria?

CHAPTER 6

THE CONTRACT

It was Sara's last night in LA. The promo work had gone well enough, but she wanted to get home. There was a lot of work waiting for her there. She had just stepped out of the shower, wrapped in towels and covered in sweet-smelling lotion, when her cell phone rang.

"Hi, Sara." She could hear the smile in Caleb's voice.

"Hi!" She sat down on the edge of the bed, surprised.

"Just want to make sure you're coming back tomorrow."

"Yep." She was noncommittal, not sure why he phoned.

"Good." Before she could say anything, he barged ahead. "We're signing with a new manager tomorrow. He's meeting us at the studio in the afternoon. If you get back in time, maybe you could swing by and we can grab some dinner afterwards."

"Who's the manager?" she asked.

"Mr. Ruiz."

"Paul Ruiz?" she queried.

"Yeah. Do you know him?"

"He was my manager once."

At the concerned tone in her voice, Caleb asked, "Is there trouble?"

"I don't know. Ruiz has some tricks, though. If you don't mind, I'd like to look at the contract. Ruiz is decent enough if you watch him."

"Okay. See you tomorrow then. Fly safe."

"I will. And, Caleb, this doesn't mean we're having dinner later. I just want to help with Ruiz."

"Oh," Caleb said quietly. "Well, I really need to talk to you, so please don't write dinner off just yet. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye."

* * *

Sara didn't even go home to drop off her suitcases. She went straight to the studio and found Caleb and his brothers in a conference room with Paul Ruiz and his assistant, Mike Miller.

When Sara entered the room, Jay leaned over and whispered to Caleb, "What's *she* doing here?"

"I asked her here, *misúŋ*."

"Why?"

"'Cuz she knows Ruiz."

Jay shot Caleb a doubtful look as he sat back in his chair.

"Sara, come on in," Caleb rose to his feet as he greeted her. "Hope

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you don't mind, Mr. Ruiz, but I asked Sara to meet me here."

"Hello, guys. It's nice to see you all again. Mr. Ruiz, it's good to see you again, too." She sat down in the chair Caleb offered her.

"Hi, Sara. How've you been?" Ruiz asked, though he wasn't remotely interested in her answer.

"Hiya, Sara," Mike Miller chimed in. "Remember me?" He was wearing a cheap business suit and a wrinkled tie. He tried so hard to be important, and yet, somehow, he never was.

Sara only smiled, but her look said, "How could I forget?"

"Back to business, guys," Ruiz said as he rustled papers importantly.

As Sara and Caleb took their seats, Caleb pushed the contract towards her. While Ruiz rambled on about clauses and whereofs and wherefores, Sara scanned the perfunctory parts of the contract and then looked at the money clauses. She reached in her purse, pulled out a pen and a small notepad, and scribbled a note, "*This should be 15%, not 25%.*"

She pushed the note towards Caleb. He read it and looked sharply at her. She nodded in confirmation. Ruiz was still talking. Sara reached into her purse again and pulled out a business card. This time she wrote, "*Tell Ruiz you'll sign after your attorney has read the contract.*" He looked quizzically at her. "What attorney?" his eyes asked. She handed him her attorney's business card — "Mr. Jacob Sanderson, Esq., Contract Law."

Ruiz was finally wrapping up. "Well, gentlemen, if there are no questions, are we ready to sign?"

"Mr. Ruiz, my brothers and I appreciate you coming here to meet

with us. I think there might be a mistake in the contract, though. Shouldn't this be 15%?" Caleb pushed the questionable page toward Ruiz. "And, before we sign this, I need my attorney to look this contract over."

Jay, Joaquin and Matthew all snapped their heads around to look at Caleb. "*What attorney?*" they were all wondering in silent unison.

"What attorney?" Ruiz asked out loud.

"Jacob Sanderson. You know him?"

"Yes. Mr. Sanderson and I have worked together before. I'll have the contract corrected and messengered over to his office first thing tomorrow morning." Ruiz shot a quick glare at Sara. Thanks to her, he had just lost a lot of money.

"Well, if that is all?" Ruiz stood up. Mike gathered up the papers and stuffed them into a briefcase. Ruiz put his hand on Caleb's shoulder, escorting him out of the room, trying to reassure him that the contract would be in perfect order the next time Caleb saw it.

Everyone else had left the conference room when Mike cornered Sara just inside the door.

"Hey, girl, you know I've been thinking an awful lot about you."

"Oh, really?" Sara tried to get past him, but he backed her up against the wall.

"Yep. It's a shame that you're not one of our clients anymore. We really could have been something."

Mike put his arm up between her and the door. He had always lusted for Sara and wanted desperately to make an impression on her.

"That so?" she said with disinterest.

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“Yeah, and I don’t mean just business, either.” He leered at her and touched her cheek with the back of his hand.

“Mike, let me by. I’ve got to go,” Sara ordered, trying to keep the disgust from her voice.

“Not so fast, honey. We’re still talking here.” Mike moved in even closer and nuzzled her neck while he whispered, “Why don’t we do something tonight?” He was scaring her now.

Caleb had taken a few steps down the hall with Ruiz and then, realizing Sara wasn’t with them, excused himself and returned to the conference room just in time to hear Mike and Sara’s last few comments. Mike looked over his shoulder at Caleb and grinned.

“Sara and I are old friends. We’re just catching up.” Mike’s smile died as he caught the hard look in Caleb’s eyes. He dropped his hand from the wall and picked the briefcase up from the table.

“Later, Sara,” he called out as he pushed past Caleb into the hall.

Caleb looked closely at Sara, drawing her into his arms. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, taking comfort from his embrace. “He’s just a big creep, that’s all. No harm done.” But he noticed that she was flushed and that a glint of panic still flickered in her eyes.

“I’ll be right back. Will you be okay by yourself for a minute?” She nodded and sat down, glad for a moment to regain her composure.

Caleb strode down the hall, his long hair swaying in time to his boots striking the floor. He was on the hunt. He saw Mike standing alone and caught up to him in three long strides. Before Mike could say anything, Caleb slammed him against the wall. Caleb’s left forearm was across Mike’s throat. His right hand was pushing

hard into Mike's chest. Mike's feet were barely touching the floor and the briefcase dangled loosely from his left hand.

"Next time — if you're stupid enough for a next time — you won't see me coming," Caleb warned through clenched teeth.

"Sorry, man," Mike choked, his face dangerously red. "Didn't know you two were involved."

"Doesn't matter," Caleb growled. "You *never* corner a woman like that — any woman." He glared at Mike and leaned in even closer to whisper, "but especially not Sara."

He slowly released his hold on Mike. "Now," he ordered, "you're going to go back there and apologize to her." When Mike didn't move fast enough to suit Caleb, he grabbed Mike by his elbow and hurried him down the hall.

The two men walked into the conference room, Mike ahead of Caleb. She looked at them, bewildered.

"Sara, please accept my apology for my uncalled for behavior earlier. It won't happen again. I promise." He said the last part over his shoulder to Caleb.

"Alright, Mike," she said quietly. "Thank you."

"Now, can I go?" Mike nervously asked Caleb, who stepped back to let Mike pass.

When Mike was gone, Sara looked quizzically at Caleb. "Just what did you do to him?"

"Nothing. We just had a discussion on manners. That's all." He refused to say anything further on the subject as he motioned towards the door. "Shall we? I have three hungry brothers waiting for me in the parking lot. They're gonna think I got lost."

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"Caleb," she said frowning, "I still don't think ..."

"Please. It's just dinner. Besides, I owe you at least that much for your help today." He gave her his most disarming smile.

"Oh, all right," she conceded. "But just dinner." She stepped into the hallway. "Your brothers didn't look too happy about me being here," Sara said as they walked out.

"Aw, I wouldn't worry about it. They didn't know you were coming, that's all." Caleb pushed the door open and they stepped into the reddish glow of a setting sun.

CHAPTER 7

THE STEAKHOUSE

Matthew was sitting sideways on the passenger's side of an old, beat-up Chevy truck, with the door swung wide open and his feet resting on the running board. Joaquin was leaning against the truck's body, his legs crossed at the ankles. Jay was pacing back and forth, talking to his girlfriend, Betsy, on his cell phone. His hair, though not as long as Caleb's, was tied back at the nape of his neck and then fell loosely down his back.

"There you are," an impatient Joaquin exclaimed. "Let's go, *čhiyé*. I'm *starving*!"

"Well, guys, I thought I'd take Sara out and..."

Before Caleb could finish his sentence, Sara chimed in.

"Why don't we all go somewhere together? I'm starving, too." She smiled at Caleb, who didn't look too happy about the idea. He had wanted to be alone with her, to talk.

THE STEAKHOUSE

“Sure. Anything, but let’s eat!” Matthew accepted her invitation for all of them. They agreed on a restaurant and split up.

The restaurant was a loud, informal steakhouse with a dance floor and a jukebox. The smell of sizzling beef greeted them in the parking lot, making Sara even hungrier. Once they got seated, Sara pulled out her cell phone and asked Caleb for her attorney’s business card. He pulled it out of his pocket, handed it to her, and watched her dial the number.

After a brief conversation with Sanderson’s assistant, Sara clicked the phone shut. “Okay, boys. You’re all set. Be there at eleven-thirty tomorrow morning.”

Joaquin looked at Caleb and then at Sara, waiting for one of them to explain what all of this was about.

“Why didn’t we sign this afternoon?”

“There was a mistake in the percentages, Quin, that would have cost us a lot of money,” Caleb explained. “Sara caught it and offered to have her lawyer look over the contract for any more mistakes.”

“Oh,” Joaquin looked at Sara. “*That’s* what you were whispering about!”

“Good catch,” Matthew said as he bit into a roll. “Thanks. You’re *not* just a pretty face.”

Sara rolled her eyes at that. “Tell me, Jay, what do you play?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Bass.”

“Oh.” Sara waited for Jay to say more. When he didn’t, she looked at Caleb for help. He just shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't wait to hear you guys play," she gamely tried again.

"We'll be playing next weekend," Joaquin volunteered, "taking a break from all this studio work."

"Great! Can I come backstage with you?"

"Sure, we'd love to have you," Joaquin said as he looked over his shoulder for the waitress. He was just being polite. In fact, the changes he saw in Caleb lately concerned him and he blamed Sara for them. He decided maybe the best way to run her off was to talk about some of Caleb's girlfriends.

"Say, Caleb. What'd you think of that band the other night?" he asked.

"Band?"

"Yeah, at the bar-and-grill."

"Oh, they were alright."

"How'd it go with Maria? You left pretty early with her."

Caleb couldn't believe it. First, Quin had deliberately sent Janice over to his first date with Sara, and now this. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sara tense up.

"What are you doing?" he asked Quin angrily.

"Nothing. Just wondering how it went. That's all."

"As you know, it didn't." Caleb glared across the table. "She went one way and I went the other."

"Oh, that's too bad."

"You need to understand something about Caleb," Matthew interjected, trying to prevent bloodshed at the table. "He doesn't have the best track record with women." He was doing his best to warn

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her about his oldest brother.

"Like Janice?" she asked.

"Exactly." Matthew rattled the ice in his empty glass.

Caleb was never happier to see a waitress show up with food than he was right then. "*This conversation is OVER!*" he thought to himself. He should have known better.

"So, tell me, will you?" Sara asked. "Who else should I know about?" Caleb rolled his eyes upward in a gesture of defeat and muttered something in Lakota under his breath.

Joaquin enjoyed watching Caleb squirm. "Let's see, where to begin?" Quin looked up at the ceiling while he thought.

"Martha," Jay volunteered as he cut into his steak.

"Oooo, Martha, how could I forget her?!" Quin grinned.

Throughout dinner, Sara was told a history of Caleb's romantic train wrecks: from Martha who ran away with his best friend; to Renee and trying to elope at 17; to Becky, who stole his car; to Ann, who said she was pregnant, even though she wasn't; to Janice the gold digger.

"No wonder you guys are worried," Sara concluded. She shook her head and addressed Caleb. "You really *are* lousy at picking women."

"And that's just the ones we *know* about," Matthew added.

"Alright, alright," Caleb stopped them. "Enough."

"What," Joaquin teased his brother, "afraid we're scaring Sara?"

"No. You're scaring me!" He'd never put his biography together quite like that before. He didn't like the way it added up.

* * *

After dinner, the brothers waited in the truck for Caleb while he said goodnight to Sara.

"Thanks again for your help with Ruiz," he said, leaning back against her car in the dark.

"Oh, sure." She sat her purse down in the car, closed the door and stood facing him. "And thank you for your help with Mike."

"No problem," he said. An awkward silence fell between them for a moment.

"Sara," Caleb finally decided to say something about the conversation she had overheard at the vending machines. "I want to apologize for sounding like a Neanderthal the other day — and for Maria — and for Joaquin at dinner just now and — for everything."

"Please. It really is none of my business."

"That's just it. I want it to be your business." He saw the look of skepticism on her face. "That's not just a line, either. I really mean it." He put his hands on her shoulders and looked straight at her. "I did a lot of thinking while you were in L.A. A lot. I'd like a chance to talk with you about it."

"Caleb," she shook her head. "No. I'm sorry, but I've run into your type before." She stepped away from his touch.

"My type?" He didn't like where this was going.

"You say what you think I want to hear, but you really live another story," she explained.

He looked away into the night, knowing he was guilty as charged. But not this time. Not with this woman. After a moment, he looked

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back at her. "I'm serious about wanting to talk to you, but not here. I've got too much to tell you and there's not enough time now. My brothers are waiting. Will you please hear me out?"

She saw the sincerity in his face once again, heard it in his voice. And once again, she heard herself agree, in spite of her misgivings. "Come over for pizza and a movie tomorrow night."

"Hmmm, what's the movie?" he smiled, trying to lighten the mood. "I'm not watching a chick flick!"

"Well, then, I'm not watching terminator-anything!" she countered.

"Tell you what. You order the pizza and I'll pick up a bunch of movies on my way over. There oughta be one of them we can agree on," Caleb said.

"Deal," Sara agreed. "And now, Caleb, I've been on a plane all day, had to rescue America's next greatest band from certain financial ruin, fended off a sleazy exec wannabe, and then played referee to a bunch of brothers over dinner. I am tired and I still have to unpack and be ready for an early morning."

"Oh, you poor thing," Caleb cooed in mock sympathy.

"And you, sir, have an appointment with an attorney in the morning. Wear a clean shirt, will ya?"

Caleb laughed. When the truck's horn was honked for the third time, he finally stood up, opened the car door for her, and watched her get in and drive away.

When the brothers got back home, Caleb was the last to walk in. He closed the door and walked over to Joaquin, who was just sitting down on the couch. He lifted him by the elbow and escorted him down the hall to Quin's room.

"What?" Joaquin asked when Caleb closed the bedroom door.

"You have crossed the line." Caleb was genuinely angry with him — the angriest Joaquin had ever seen him. "Do you hate Sara that much?"

"What?" Joaquin didn't want to admit that he knew what Caleb was talking about.

"First you send Janice to our date and then, tonight, you deliberately bring up Maria, even though you *knew* nothing happened! Why?"

"I don't hate Sara, *čhiyé*." Joaquin sat down on his bed. "I just don't like what she's doing to you."

"What is that supposed to mean? She isn't doing anything to me."

"Oh yes she is. She's got you thinking only about her."

"So? I do that with women from time to time."

"Yeah, but not like this. This is different."

"How?"

"Your turning down Maria, for one. You kicked Janice to the curb. I'm afraid you're going to get serious with Sara."

"Why would that bother you, *misúŋ*? Sara is great. I'd hope you'd be happy about me finding someone like her."

Quin stood back up and walked over to his dresser, picking up items and setting them down again, his back to Caleb. Finally he spoke, still not facing his brother.

"If it gets that serious, you'll probably get married. At the very least, you'll move in together."

"And?"

"And that will bust us up. We won't be the Black Wolf boys anymore." He turned around to finally look Caleb in the eyes with his own worried expression.

"Oh, Joaquin, is that what's bothering you?" Caleb's tone softened. "*Misúŋ*, we will be in our 80s and we'll still be the Black Wolf boys. Nothing is ever gonna change that. Not getting married, or having kids, or moving away from each other."

Quin sighed. "I just don't want you leaving. That's all."

Caleb laughed. "Oh, Quin, the day is coming — sooner than you think — when you're gonna find your own woman and the last people you'll want around are your three brothers."

He got Joaquin to smile with that. "I don't know how it's going to go with Sara. I've made a big mess of it so far. But, would you at least give her a chance?"

"You *have* screwed it up, haven't you?" Joaquin laughed. "Yeah, okay. Get married. See if I care." He pushed Caleb's shoulder, teasing him.

Caleb opened the door to leave, but Quin stopped him. "You're right, *čhiyé*. Sara is great. I hope it works out for you."

"Thanks for saying so."

CHAPTER 8

DINNER AND A MOVIE

Sara met him at the door, wearing cutoffs and a red tank top. She was barefoot and had her hair pulled back in a low ponytail. Caleb smiled as he walked in with a sack full of movies and a bottle of wine. He had on scruffy jeans and a black T-shirt that accentuated his chest and shoulders. His hair was loose.

Sara took the items out of his hands and placed them on the kitchen table. When the pizza arrived a few minutes later, Caleb answered the door and, by the time he had paid the boy, Sara had moved everything to the living room coffee table. There were plump throw pillows scattered on the floor. Sara leaned on a blue one next to the coffee table while she looked through the pile of movies.

"I'm hungry," Caleb announced, as he walked over with the hot pizza. He sat it on the glass coffee table and plopped down on the floor next to Sara, his back resting against the sofa.

"Aha!" Sara exclaimed. "This one!" She pulled a DVD out of the

sack, stood up and put it in the machine. Caleb opened the wine and poured some into the two goblets Sara had set out.

"How'd it go with the attorney today?" Sara asked.

"Good. Actually, really good," Caleb swallowed before he continued. "Sanderson caught a few more 'mistakes' and sent the new contract back to Ruiz. We'll sign off on the whole thing by Tuesday at the latest. Oh, and I wore a clean shirt, just for you."

"That's my boy," she praised as she reached for another slice.

* * *

The movie was over, the pizza was long gone, and the wine bottle was empty. Sara was lying on her stomach among the pillows on the floor next to Caleb. She picked up the remote and clicked off the TV.

"Okay, Caleb. Talk." She rolled over on her side to face him, leaning her head on her hand.

"Okay." He thought about it for a moment. "You're right. In the past, I told women what they wanted to hear and then went out and did whatever I wanted to do. But you — your words — floored me." He reached across to push her hair back, to touch her. "I *have* given up on finding what I really want. I'll give my body, no problem. But I won't give my heart — not to anyone — not again." He sat up, leaning his back against the sofa, knees raised, elbows on knees.

"If I thought, really thought for one second, that there was someone out there who I could trust with my heart, all this other stuff would disappear, like this!" He snapped his fingers and looked down at her on the floor, hoping she believed him. He was being as honest as

he knew how. "I'll tell you something else," he added, "I don't like telling you this stuff."

"Afraid I'll use it against you?"

"Something like that." He clasped his hands together. "When I saw you standing behind me at the vending machine, I just about died. I've never been more ashamed in my life." He shook his head, grimacing. "We had just had a great evening together and then you hear me talking like that."

"That was kind of a shock," she agreed. "But, I've heard worse. You went out to see Maria anyway, though. Didn't you? Isn't that what Quin was talking about? You say you were ashamed, but you went to see her anyway?"

He dropped his head to his chest in a gesture of guilt and then raised it. He began his explanation, speaking slowly at first. "I went to hear the band with my brothers. Matthew and Quin were on the prowl, but Jay and I went just for the music. Maria was there and we got to talking. When she got off work, I left with her and made it as far as the parking lot. I couldn't do it, Sara. I told her goodnight and I went home, alone. That is all that happened."

"Oh, Caleb," she sighed, "that's exactly what I meant. You tell me one thing and do something else. I've said it before. You don't owe me any explanations. It's your life. Live it however you want to. I just don't want all those games around me and I'm glad I found out now what you're really like."

"But, that's just it, Sara. I'm not really like that. Not really. Please, I hope you believe me."

"Then *why* did you leave with her?"

Caleb looked intensely at her. He had been asking himself the same question and hadn't come up with any answer that he liked. He also knew that whatever he said next would determine his chances with Sara.

"She made it very easy for me to go home with her. It's what I've always done before. So, when she said to come on, I was right behind her out the door. But, for some reason, this time it didn't feel right. By the time we got to my truck, I knew I didn't want what she was offering. Not really. Not anymore. I've changed."

"Caleb, people don't change overnight. They just don't."

"They can if they want to bad enough." He looked meaningfully at her and added, "For the right person."

"You're assuming a lot about someone you just met," she warned. "I could be another Janice for all you know." She sat up cross-legged, facing him.

He laughed. "I don't think the world could handle two Janices."

"Yeah, you're right. Probably not." She smiled at him.

He looked away, shaking his head at old memories and then turned back.

"As far as me knowing someone, I'm not willing to assume a whole lot. I've been burned too many times before. I'm just asking that you take the risk *with* me. Let me get to know you — see if you are who I think you might be — who I'm hoping you are. And you take a good long look at me, as well. We might surprise each other." He smiled at her and then grew serious again. "You can't kiss me like that, breathe hope back into me, and then walk away to leave me twisting in the wind. You just can't, woman."

She thought about his words. The idea that he was taking a risk had never occurred to her. That he was "a player" just to protect his own heart had never crossed her mind. What he was saying now was making some sense to her.

"Tell me, what are your dreams?" Sara asked.

"My dreams?" Caleb thought about it for a minute. "Well, of course there's the dream for our band. But that's coming true. There's also the dream about my life and about who I'll share it with." He paused. "I've always pictured me with a family and I hope some day that happens."

"You mean with kids and a back yard and a dog?" Sara asked.

"Yep. The whole thing — tree houses and the measles and soccer practice." His grin faded as he grew serious again. "Sara, I've run fast and loose with my life, my money, my lovers. That feels really empty lately. I need someone I am totally in love with and can completely trust — someone I can have children with and know they will be raised in a house filled with love. My parents have that, so I know it's possible." He had never put it in words before. But as he heard himself speak, it was exactly what he wanted.

Sara was impressed. Most of the men she knew hadn't evolved this far. The thought of a family was the last thing on their minds.

"So, what do you think?" he asked. "Wanna jump off this cliff with me? See where we land?"

"We take it slow?"

"Slow and steady."

"And you won't see me one night and Maria the next?" She wasn't being funny.

“Maria — Janice — all of them are history. I’m done.”

Sara considered not only what he had said, but how he had said it. Her instincts were telling her this was the truth; he wasn’t trying to play her. He had made himself vulnerable by speaking from the heart. That was enough for her.

“You’d better be telling me the truth, mister.” She leaned in close, her eyes narrowed. “Because we’re jumping and if I find out you’ve been lying ...”

It took a second for her words to register. “We’re jumping? Oh! Come here.” He reached for her, holding her. “I’m not lying. I swear I’m not.” He felt a little more of the wall around his heart crumble, actually shatter, from joy.”

He kissed her, laying her back on the floor, his hair falling onto her throat. She smiled, moved closer to him and returned his kiss. The feel of her soft body lying next to him was delightful. He raised himself up on his left elbow and put his right knee across her legs. The next kiss was long — and unhurried — and very sweet. For it to be with *this* woman made it even sweeter.

“You won’t be sorry, Sara,” he whispered.

He leaned in for another kiss, enjoying her response to him. His right hand moved from her shoulder downward to caress her breast and then to her waist, where he slid his hand under her tank top to the softness of her stomach. His hand was moving slowly, seductively upward when he felt her body change, freeze.

“What is it?” he whispered in her ear, his eyes half closed.

“This isn’t slow and steady,” she said. “At least not for me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” He removed his hand. “I was just enjoying your

kisses so much."

"Me, too," she smiled as she sat up. "And don't apologize. We'll get this figured out as we go." She stood up, needing to change the subject. "By the way, in case you don't know, I'll be leaving in a month for a national tour."

"Oh, great," Caleb was trying to be happy for her. Her touring for long periods of time hadn't crossed his mind until just now. "How long will you be gone?"

"It's only a 10-city tour, so it won't be too long."

"Where will you start out?"

"Probably in LA."

"What cities?"

"Let's see if I can remember them all," she said over her shoulder as she carried the dinner remains back to the kitchen. "There's LA, Denver, Salt Lake, Chicago, Cincinnati, Memphis." Sara closed her eyes trying to remember them all. "Atlanta Philadelphia, New York and — and — Boston." She sat the wine goblets down on the table and ticked off her fingers as she silently counted. "Yeah, I think that's right."

"Wow, you're really crossing the whole country." He followed, carrying the pizza box into the kitchen.

"Yeah, but it's what I signed on for. Actually, I'm looking forward to it. I've been in the studio for so long, I really need to be in front of an audience. There is so much going on, I've even got a small office set up at the studio. It helps keep me organized with the attorneys and publicists and everything." She ran water in the kitchen sink to wash the goblets.

"And, speaking of playing to an audience, are you sure it's okay if I come along with you guys tomorrow night?" she asked.

Caleb walked up behind her and put his arms around her waist. "I wouldn't have it any other way." He kissed the back of her neck and then picked up a dishtowel to dry the glasses.

"I'd better get going," he said when they were done in the kitchen. "It's getting late."

"Alright." She put her arms around his waist and leaned her head against his shoulder, simply holding him. Her action surprised him a little. There was no ulterior motive behind her gesture. She didn't want money, she didn't want sex, she didn't want anything from him. It had been a long time since someone had treated him like this. He put his arms around her and, closing his eyes, laid his cheek against her head. Having this woman in his arms was already making a difference, was already changing him. What more could her gentle, genuine spirit do to him — for him? He wanted to know.

"Good night, sweetheart," he finally said.

"Good night, Lakota Man."

"Lakota Man?"

"Yes. I've had 'sweethearts' and 'honeys' before, but you're one-of-a-kind. Do you mind?"

"Hmm." He thought about that for a second and then said, "Actually, I kinda like it." Caleb said it again for effect, "Lakota Man." He smiled and then kissed her once more before he left for home.

* * *

All three of his brothers were lounging in the living room, watching

an old movie, when he got home. The flickering TV screen was the only light in the dark room. Matthew looked up at Caleb from his comfortable position in the recliner.

"What? Back again so early?!" Joaquin exclaimed. "You either need to find another line or get another girl."

"Joaquin, poor Joaquin," Caleb said with an air of superiority and pity in his voice, "maybe one day you'll understand."

"Understand what?"

"It's not always about staying overnight, *misúŋ*."

"Since when?"

"Since Sara kissed me."

Joaquin wondered what that meant.

Caleb sat down on the couch next to Jay. "Whatcha'll watching?"

"A space monster movie," Matthew answered from his place in the recliner. They sat in silence for a few minutes watching the movie.

"So, spill," Jay said. "What'd you guys do?"

"Nothing much," Caleb answered. "We watched a movie, had some pizza, talked."

"And?" Jay prodded.

"And nothing," Caleb said.

"It's okay," Joaquin turned to look back over his shoulder. "I'm old enough now you can talk about the sex stuff," he teased.

"The 'sex stuff' is none of your business," Caleb retorted.

"Since when?" Matthew asked with real surprise. "You've always told us the sex stuff."

“Yeah, well, not any more” Caleb said.

Matthew studied Caleb in the half-light. He wasn’t behaving like he normally did with a new girlfriend. He was quieter, more reserved when talking about Sara. Matthew wondered if his talk with Caleb had sunk in.

“Caleb, are you okay?” Matthew asked.

“I’m fine, why?”

“You’re acting different.”

Caleb looked at Matthew and saw that he was honestly concerned.

“I’m acting different because she’s different. Sara’s given me a lot to think about — a whole lot. She’s raised the bar pretty high. Besides, if I’m not careful, you’ll give me a good thumping. Right?”

“Right.”

“Now, can we watch the movie?”

* * *

“Steven, hi. It’s Sis.” Sara called her brother shortly after Caleb left her place. “I know it’s late, but I wanted to talk to you.”

“Sure, Sis. What’s up?” Steven got up from his bed and crossed his room to turn the stereo down.

“I’ve met someone.” Steven was silent at the news. “Well,” Sara continued, “aren’t you going to say anything?”

“What do you want me to say?” Steven asked. “I’m not sure you’ve gotten over your last boyfriend, yet.”

“I know,” she agreed. “But this is different somehow. I can feel

it."

"Different. O-kaayyy." Steven's voice let her know he wasn't buying it. "How is this one different?"

"I wish I could put it into words. We've only had two dates, but I already trust him. I really like this guy, Steven, and I just wanted to tell somebody."

"Okay, Sis. What's his name?"

"Caleb. Caleb Black Wolf. He plays with a band."

"Another musician. *Great.*" Sara didn't miss the sarcasm in her brother's voice. "Have you told Mom yet?"

"No, not yet. But I will."

"Sara, if this one blows up ..." He didn't finish his sentence.

"I know. I know. But I don't think it will. I really don't."

"It better not. I don't think you can survive another direct hit. You've already had two in the last year." Steven was worried about his sister. She managed to attract the biggest losers he had ever seen.

"Well, I want you to meet him. You can see for yourself," she said.

"Okay, Sis. Just name the time and place. I'll be there."

"Thanks, Steven. You're the best. Goodnight."

CHAPTER 9

A NIGHT AT THE (SOAP) OPERA

The venue was a packed house. The Black Wolf Band was a huge local favorite. People either sat at tables along the sides of the walls or stood crowded on the floor, talking amongst themselves while they waited for the concert to start.

The equipment was set up, the guitars tuned, the sound checks run. The Black Wolf brothers were ready. Sara stood backstage with Caleb and Matthew.

“You two look mighty fine tonight,” she said. “Don’t let the groupies carry you off!” Caleb laughed, but Matthew snorted, “It’s been tried before.”

Matthew was wearing all black with a black hat sporting a silver hatband. He looked sharp! Caleb was wearing jeans, a dark purple shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a black vest. His hair was loose, except for one solitary braid on the right side tied off with leather.

Jay and Joaquin joined them; Jay in white jeans and a blue shirt, his hair hanging loosely around his shoulders; Joaquin in jeans and a close-fitting, red T-shirt that showed off his muscular drummer's biceps. His leather headband kept his hair out of his eyes. He was a real heartbreaker, with an infectious grin.

"All set?" Caleb asked.

"Yep, we're ready," Joaquin answered.

The audience started stomping their feet in impatience. After a few moments, the house lights went down and the stage lights blazed into full glory. An invisible announcer boomed, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, we are proud to introduce, from our own great State of Texas, the Black Wolf Band!" The audience went crazy as first Joaquin, then Jay, then Matthew, and finally Caleb walked on stage and took their places. Just before he walked out, Caleb grabbed Sara by the waist, pulled her against him and kissed her hard. Then, he disappeared into the spotlights.

Their first number was a crowd favorite and the audience was dancing before the first bar was over. Jay's skill on the bass was exceptional. He and Joaquin were in perfect synch with their pounding rhythms and changing tempos. They played with each other and off of each other, building each song to the exact right pitch.

Matthew had an inherent sense of how to punch up or mellow a song, depending on the audience and the ambience. He truly was a master of his craft.

Caleb's guitar riffs defied you to follow his lightning-fast fingers up and down the strings. Women would melt at the sound of his mellow voice in a seductive love ballad. Together, the Black Wolf brothers were a joy to listen to.

A NIGHT AT THE (SOAP) OPERA

Standing backstage, hearing their music for the first time, Sara was as proud of them as if she had taught them all herself. “*My boys,*” she kept thinking. “*Those are MY boys!*” She couldn’t quit grinning.

The band had been playing for about an hour when Caleb started a song by saying, “I’d like to dedicate this song to a very special woman in my life.”

Sara felt herself tearing up. “*That’s me,*” she thought. “*How sweet.*”

Caleb continued, “Mary, this one’s for you.”

“*Mary?!? Who the blazes is Mary?*” Sara was stunned. “*His brothers had mentioned a Becky, an Ann, and a Martha, but no Mary. So, who is Mary, anyway?*” That was one question she was going to ask as soon as she saw Caleb.

From the stage, Caleb could see the first few yards into the room before the audience was hidden in darkness. There were the usual couples on a date, several groups of young women, and a few band wannabes. Caleb was glad they were having a good time dancing and enjoying the music.

As he looked at the crowd of both familiar and unfamiliar faces, he recognized one that made him frown. There, standing close to the stage, dressed like a \$20 call girl, was Janice and her “floozy posse,” as Jay had dubbed her friends. She was dancing provocatively, trying to get Caleb to notice her. Dressed with the same goal in mind, she was wearing a hot pink tube top and short shorts, and very little else.

Janice wiggled and bounced for all she was worth under the guise of ‘dancing.’ Her tube top would occasionally slip down, showing

even more cleavage, and she would conveniently 'forget' to adjust it, until she was sure Caleb had seen her. He knew what she was up to and, for once, she had no affect on him whatsoever. If anything, he felt a little sorry for her.

Near the end of their set, Matthew stepped up to introduce the next song.

"We've just written a new song that we'd like to try out for you tonight. Let us know if you like it. It's called 'Little Miss Kiss Me.'"

Joaquin twirled the drumsticks in his fingers and then clicked off the time. Black Wolf jumped into a raucous beat that had the audience tearing up the floor. Halfway through the song, Jay and Caleb went into a side-by-side shuffle that took them from one side of the stage to the other. The audience roared. Later in the song, Jay stood behind his mike, his bass bouncing as he thumped the strings. Caleb leaned into his guitar riff, his long hair falling forward, hiding his face. They got a charge from playing this song.

Sara listened to the lyrics and knew that they were about her. It was a great song and, she could tell by the audience's reaction, it was destined to be a hit. What she wanted to know was *who* named her "Little Miss Kiss Me!"

Then, the concert was over. The audience had gotten the last encore they could from the tired and sweaty brothers and was finally breaking up to go home. Caleb stepped off stage and reached for a bottle of water, while looking around for Sara. Before he knew what was going on, someone had grabbed him around the waist and was hugging him hard.

"Oh, baby, you were *wonderful*," Janice crooned, looking up into his

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astonished eyes. "Absolutely wonderful!" She was not letting go.

Caleb sat the bottle of water down and grabbed Janice's arms to push her away. But she was too quick. She reached up and kissed him before he could stop her. When he finally broke free, Sara was standing behind Janice with the strangest look he had ever seen on a person's face.

Caleb grabbed Janice by the shoulders and shook her. "What are you doing, Janice?" He was really angry. "I *told* you it's over and I meant it."

"But, honey," Janice whimpered, "You *didn't* mean it. You were just trying to impress that Amazon you were with, that's all." Janice was unaware of Sara's presence. "You couldn't honestly give up all this," she gestured to her buxom figure. "Besides, you know I love you. I always have."

Caleb was disgusted. But before he could say anything else, Janice heard a voice behind her.

"Here, Caleb, let the 'Amazon' handle this one." Sara clamped a firm hand on Janice's bare shoulder and spun her around. "Look, Janice," Sara spit the words down at her, "you might not have noticed, seeing how you're slow and all, so I'll spell it out for you."

Janice looked up at Sara's face and realized she had a fight on her hands.

Sara continued, "Caleb is *my* man. *Not* yours. If I *ever* see you touch him, speak to him, or make contact with him in *any* way again, you will be three inches shorter than you are now. And I'm just the woman to do it! Are we clear?"

Janice glared as Sara turned her by her shoulders towards the exit

and gave her a small shove. "We'll see," Janice hissed over her shoulder and then flounced out the door.

"Whoa, woman!" Caleb stood back in mock fright, "Remind me never to make you mad."

Sara was shaking, she was so angry. When he saw that she wasn't laughing at his joke, he reached out for her.

"Come here, baby. It's okay." Caleb felt her trembling against his chest. "Hey, hey. She's not worth it," he crooned. "It's over." He lifted her chin and kissed her lightly.

"Just hold me for a minute," Sara asked, "and I'll be okay. I'm just not use to threatening people." She gave a small laugh as she tried to regain her composure.

"*Your* man, huh?" Caleb whispered in her ear, "I like that! You know what this means, don't you? It means I got me a woman! Prettiest woman that I ever saw, too." He was trying to get her to relax, to laugh, but he was also telling her how pleased he was. She looked up at him, smiled, and then put her head back on his shoulder.

After a few moments, Jay walked up and said, "I just saw Janice looking like she'd been shot. What's up?"

"She ran into a buzz saw," Caleb grinned over the top of Sara's head.

Feeling calmer now, Sara stepped away from Caleb and turned to Jay. "You guys are absolutely wonderful! I am so proud of all of you!" She spontaneously hugged Jay, much to his discomfort and secret delight.

"By the way," she turned back to Caleb, "who is Mary?"

"What?"

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"Mary. You dedicated a song to her tonight?"

"Oh, she's our mom," Caleb laughed. "Who did you think she was?"

"Never mind," she mumbled, feeling ashamed of herself.

"Hey, guys," Joaquin joined them, "I'm hungry!"

"So what's new?" Matthew also walked up. "You're always hungry."

"Let's go somewhere and eat," Joaquin suggested.

"I'm kinda tired, *misúñ*," Caleb countered.

"Tell you what," Sara chimed in, "why don't we go back to your place and I'll fix something for everyone?"

At first, their eyes lit up at the thought of not having to eat their own cooking, which led them to thinking about the kitchen and its current condition, which led them to recalling the state of the rest of their place, which led them to say, almost in unison, "NO!"

"What? Why not?" Sara thought that maybe they didn't want her around.

"Thanks for the offer, but our place really is one 'final notice' short of being permanently condemned," Caleb explained.

"Well then, come over to my place." She looked at all four of them. "I won't take no for an answer. I know that you're tired and hungry and I'm a pretty good cook, too."

To her surprise, Jay was the one who accepted on their behalf. "Thanks, Sara. It sounds great. Do we need to pick anything up on our way over?"

"Nope. I've got it covered."

"Then we'll meet you over there," Caleb said. Sara walked out to her car, happy that she was making inroads with Caleb's brothers.

CHAPTER 10

THE GAME PLAN

Soon, the brothers were sitting around Sara's kitchen table, hungrily devouring ham and cheese omelets and toast.

"This is good!" Joaquin said between mouthfuls.

"Thanks. More coffee?" Sara refilled his mug.

"You've got a nice place here," Matthew commented, as he looked over his shoulder into the living room.

Sara smiled and caught the wink Caleb gave her.

"Hey, Sara," Matthew continued, "I heard you had a little talk with Janice tonight." Sara tried to read his poker-face expression.

"Yep," he paused and nodded his head slowly, "Heard tell you were kinda hard on the poor girl." Was he disapproving? She couldn't tell.

"Shoulda punched her lights out!" Joaquin cut in. All four brothers

roared with laughter.

"I'd have paid good money to see that," Matthew exclaimed. "And in this corner, the Amazon!"

"Guess you've got a new nickname, Sara," Caleb grinned.

"By the way, gentlemen," Sara caught their attention, "speaking of nicknames, this new song of yours, 'Little Miss Kiss Me?'" They all guiltily looked away, sensing what was next. "Who *exactly* named me that?"

Four different index fingers pointed to four different individuals. "He did."

"Oh, it's like that, is it? Honor among thieves and all?" Sara laughed. "Well, for what it's worth, it's a *great* song! I predict it will go far. Just remember, I get a percentage. Hey, it *is* my reputation here!"

She brought more toast to the table.

"You ready to turn 19, Quin?" Jay asked. "Saturday's coming up pretty quick, *misúŋ*."

"Is Saturday your birthday?" Sara asked. Joaquin nodded feeling a little embarrassed. "Well, congratulations. What are you doing to celebrate?"

"We'll probably head to our folks," he answered. "Mom always likes to make a fuss."

"Don't blame Mom," Caleb countered, "You throw a fit if you don't get a German chocolate cake."

Joaquin punched Caleb's left shoulder. "Shut up!"

Sara left the kitchen to go back to her room. As she was returning, she overheard Jay talking to Caleb. "I'm bringing Betsy. Are you

gonna bring Sara?"

"No, *misúŋ*," Caleb replied, "I don't think that's a good idea." Sara stopped in the hall. "*Why not?*" she wondered.

When Sara returned to the kitchen, they were done with their meal. As she began clearing the table, the brothers helped straighten up the kitchen in record time.

"Why can't we do this at our place?" Matthew asked them. "It doesn't seem so hard." The only answer he got was laughter.

The brothers said goodnight to Sara, thanking her again for the meal. From the way Caleb had been acting, they knew they would be seeing more of her, at least in the near future.

"You coming, *čhiyé*?" Joaquin asked as he made his way to the front door.

"No, you go on. Trade keys with me. You take the truck home and get the equipment inside. I'll take your car. I want to stay here for a little while."

"Oh, okay. See you later." Quin winked at Caleb conspiratorially.

The three brothers left and Caleb plopped down on the sofa. "Thanks for feeding this outfit," he said to Sara as she sat down beside him.

"Sure. Anytime. I really like your brothers."

"I'll remind you that you said that," he laughed, "just before you drop-kick Quin out the nearest window for one of his latest pranks." She snuggled against his side as he leaned back.

"Tired?" Sara asked.

"A little," he said. "But mainly, I need some of this." He lifted her chin and leaned in to kiss her.

"My, oh, my, you've got the *best* sugar," he murmured, referring to her kisses. He kissed her again and began unbuttoning her blouse. She put her hand on his to stop him.

"What are you doing?" she sat up and frowned at him. "I thought we already talked about this."

Caleb was exasperated. Hadn't she just told Janice that he was "her man?" He thought that had changed things, particularly since they had already agreed to give this relationship a chance. He had never shared this much about himself with any woman, especially *before* going to bed with her.

"Sara," he said. "I want to make love to my woman. That's all."

"I thought you said slow and steady."

"I did. But, I hope you don't think that making out on your couch is going to be enough for very long." He sounded angry. Being with a woman had never been this complicated before.

She closed her eyes in frustration. She wasn't ready. Not yet.

"Caleb! You're not the only one with battle scars. I want you *so* badly." She put her hand on his chest. "But, I need for us to stop before I ruin a really good thing."

He looked at her with serious brown eyes. "I don't want to ruin it either. But how is making love to you going to ruin it?" He'd never had this kind of conversation with a girlfriend before.

"Okay, I'll try to explain." She sat sideways on the couch to face him and took his hand. "Let's say a week from now, I do something really awful and you decide to leave."

"There's nothing you cou..."

“Just suppose,” she interrupted him. “And we were already intimate. How much more would it hurt? If this doesn’t work out — and you have to admit, we both have lousy track records — it will be one more thing to work through. When I sleep with someone, it’s never just sex to me. I get all tangled up with that person. I just need to be sure about where we’re headed before I complicate it with even more emotions, more ties. Please, Caleb, I’m just asking for a little more time.”

He thought about it as she spoke. This was new for him. Taking a woman to bed had never been that big a deal before.

“I’m just not sure what to do or how to handle this,” he finally said. “All I *am* sure about is that I want you — not just for now, either.” He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it to show he wasn’t angry any more. “What kind of time are you talking about?”

After a moment’s silence, she said, “I’ll tell you my game plan.”

“Your game plan?” Caleb laughed while he thought to himself, “*This oughta be good!*”

“Yep. There are three situations I need to see us in before I’ll know if we really are good together or not; if we’re ready for an intimate relationship.”

“Three? Pray, Madam, do tell,” he said in a mock English accent.

“Okay, but they’re probably not what you think. First,” she ticked off one finger, “I need to meet your family. Not just your brothers, but your parents and your sisters, too.”

Caleb made a mental note that this was not going to be easy. His brothers were one thing, but the rest of them?

“Second, you need to see me at my absolute worst.”

"What?" Caleb was really confused now.

"Yep. Imagine I'm having a bad hair day, pms-ing badly, and having car trouble all at the same time. If you can survive being in a room with me for five minutes on a day like that, there is hope for us."

Caleb laughed out loud and yet, he knew what she meant. Her candor was refreshing.

"And the third?" he asked with genuine curiosity.

"The third is my least favorite and, yet, probably the most necessary." She took a deep breath and looked straight at him, "We need to have our first fight. I mean a serious fight."

"Whaaa?" He looked stunned.

"Think about it, Caleb. It's easy to be around someone who is all sweetness and light. What is it like when they are clenching their jaws thinking you are the most stubborn idiot they have *ever* had the misfortune to meet? Will we fight fair or will we go for the jugular? We can tell a whole lot about 'us' by the way we fight. If we can still respect each other *while* we're fighting, then we've got a real chance."

"When did you get to be so wise?" he asked. He wasn't joking either.

"You see these dents in my head?" she asked as she lowered the top of her head and pointed to it. "Those, my dear, are the battle scars I told you about. I apparently learn everything the hard way!"

"Oh, baby," he reached for her face, "I am so sorry that *anyone* hurt you."

"We've both been hurt, Caleb. But I'm not sorry about any of it. It's brought me to you." She smiled. "So, do we have a game plan?"

“Yes’m. We do,” Caleb nodded once, returning her smile.

Sara stood up. “Good. And now, mister, I’d like you to listen to some of my latest work.”

“About time,” Caleb said. “I’ve been wondering if you’ve actually been working at the studio or just working at driving me crazy.” He ducked quickly to miss a flying pillow.

Sara put on a draft of her latest CD and sat down next to Caleb. He laid his head back against the sofa, closed his eyes and held her while he listened, her head on his shoulder, hand on his thigh. Her soulful voice and blues melody filled the room with depth and richness and life. Not only could she sing, but her lyrics spoke straight to the heart, wove their magic through his mind, and brought him with them on their journey.

He had always liked her work, but sitting in her living room, holding her, left him filled up by her ability and talent. He felt grateful to be part of her life.

All of this shone in his eyes when he turned around to face her. “You,” he murmured and then leaned in to kiss her with all of the passion that her music had inspired in him. He felt her tongue in his mouth, felt her hands moving sensuously across his back, down his shoulders and across his chest. She was sending him some real heat. After a moment, he pulled away a little to look at her.

“Don’t start what you won’t let me finish,” he whispered.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” She lowered her hands. “I really *do* want you, too — someday.” She smiled wistfully. “It’s late. Maybe you ought to go.”

“Yeah.” He sounded regretful. “Someday soon,” he finished her

sentence for her. They stood up and she walked him to the door.

"Goodnight, Lakota Man," she smiled and touched his face.

"Goodnight, baby." He gave her one more kiss and then left for home.

CHAPTER 11

THE PIG

Late the next night, Sara was switching off her kitchen light — ready to turn in for the night — when she heard a knock at her door. She checked through the peephole and stepped back in surprise.

“What on earth is *he* doing here?” she muttered as she opened the door.

“Richard!”

“Hi, Sara,” Richard said as he pushed his way in. He was just a bit taller than Sara, with a lanky, Jagger-esque build and sandy hair, which he wore short. He was handsome and cocky.

“Long time, no see, girl.” He turned and hugged the surprised Sara.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, stepping out of the embrace. Richard walked over to the sofa and plopped down. He patted the

sofa invitingly next to him.

"Come here and I'll tell you all about it." Sara reluctantly walked across the room and sat on the edge of a chair.

"What?" Richard raised his eyebrows, "no snuggle with your old Rich?" He shrugged his shoulders in response to her silence and said, "Well, suit yourself. I just got back from Europe. Flew in this afternoon and had to come see you. Our tour was a smash, by the way." He grinned at her.

"Richard," Sara said with some confusion, "why would you come here? We split up, remember?"

"Did we?" Richard shook his head. "Sorry, girl, but I don't recall that."

"You don't recall?" Sara looked stunned. "Then what was that huge fight we had just before you left for Berlin?"

"Oh, *that*!" Richard slapped his forehead. "That was a lover's quarrel."

"A lover's quarrel!?" She couldn't believe this. "I go over to your place to say goodbye and find you in bed with, not one, but, two women and you call that a lover's quarrel?"

She stood up, the emotions of that horrible night rushing back.

"Was it two? I was kinda wasted," he said with no remorse. "Besides, what could I do? The poor girls just wanted to wish me luck in my travels."

"This is too much, Richard. You need to go." Sara walked towards the door, hoping he'd leave with no trouble. She turned to face him and, seeing that she was serious, he slowly rose to his feet.

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“Okay, Sara, it’s late, so I’ll go. But, I’ll be back. We’re not through.” He walked over to her and, taking her face in his hands, gave her a kiss she couldn’t escape. He let her go, winked at her and swaggered to the door.

“Richard,” she called after him, “we *are* through. Don’t come back. Ever.” He shrugged his shoulders, like he didn’t believe her, and then closed the door behind him.

As soon as he left, she locked the door and went into her bedroom. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she couldn’t keep the memories away.

“Richard, honey, where are you?” she had called out when she let herself into his condo. She wandered through the living room littered with whiskey and gin bottles and walked up the stairs. She had heard noises coming from his room. The door was ajar, so she quietly swung it open further.

There, in the king size bed — *their* bed — was Richard, lying on his back. Some nude blonde was straddling him, rocking back and forth to their mutual delight, while a second woman, with short brown hair, lay beside them, feverishly kissing him.

She remembered standing there, too shocked to say anything. The second woman looked up and said, “Oh, hello,” as if she’d just run into Sara at the grocery store.

Richard opened his eyes and, seeing her there, pushed the first woman away.

“Sara!” he exclaimed. He turned to the two women and said, “Party’s over, girls. Scoot.” They grabbed various articles of clothing from the floor and furniture and flounced past Sara out the door.

Sara recovered enough to cry out, "What are you doing?"

"Oh, them?" he stalled for time as he reached for a robe. He stood up and walked over to her. "They were just giving me a proper sendoff."

She turned to leave, but he grabbed her by her elbow.

"Let me go!" she ordered.

"Sara, please don't be angry. I love you." He tightened his hold.

"You love me?" she said incredulously. "Then what was *that*?" She pointed toward the disheveled bed.

"That? That was just sex. You know, sex, drugs, rock and roll." He swayed slightly, drunk.

"Just sex." She was sick to her stomach.

"It comes with the territory. You know that," he defended himself. "It doesn't mean anything."

"Let me go!" she ordered again. This time she broke free and ran down the stairs to her car. She still didn't know how she got home that night. She had been crying too hard to see the road.

That had been over 6 months ago. Richard had left the next day with his band for their tour. She hadn't spoken to him since. It took her a long time to get over the shock of what she had seen. She still wasn't over the fact that someone like Richard had snuck under her radar.

* * *

The next day, Sara was walking down a hall at the recording studio, towards the lounge, sneaking in a few minutes for a soda. To her

dismay, Richard came striding up to her with a huge grin on his face.

"Morning," he greeted her. Then, without another word, he took Sara by her shoulders and, pushing her against the wall, he kissed her intently, possessively.

"There." He stepped back with a satisfied look on his face. Sara reached back and slapped him as hard as she could.

"I told you last night..." she hissed.

"And I told *you* last night that I'd be back." He held his hand to his face, bewilderment in his eyes. "I'm not kidding, Sara. I love you."

"You don't know the meaning of the word!"

"Now, wait a minute," Richard argued, "I wouldn't have come all the way back to Austin if I didn't love you, if I didn't care. I need you."

"You don't need me. You need a keeper!" She stood there, arms folded across her chest, glaring at him.

"Sara, please. I came here to work this out."

"Not if you were the last man on earth!" Sara turned and stormed down the hall.

Caleb walked by on his way to Studio C. Glancing down a side-hall as he passed, he saw Sara standing there arguing with a man. He stopped, backed up one step, and started down the hallway towards them. Sara, not seeing Caleb, made an abrupt turn and, in a moment, she was out of sight, leaving Richard standing there wondering what her problem was.

As Caleb passed Richard, he stared hard at him. "*Who is this guy?*" he wondered. "*And why was he arguing with Sara?*" Richard gave Caleb a perfunctory glance and turned to leave the building.

When Caleb finally caught up to Sara, he walked up behind her and touched her shoulder. She wheeled around expecting it to be Richard. Caleb saw the look of anger in her eyes just before she realized who it was.

"Oh, Caleb," she whispered, her blue eyes wide with relief. She threw herself into his arms and burst into tears.

"Who *was* that?" Caleb was concerned. He wrapped his arms tightly around her trying to protect her from whatever it was that had upset her.

"That was one of the dents in my head," she managed a smile as she looked tearily up at him. Caleb led her to her office.

"Okay," he said when they were finally alone. "Talk to me." He reached across and wiped a tear off her cheek with his thumb.

"That was Richard." She had stopped crying and could now speak clearly. "Supposedly the 'love of my life.' Ha! I found him in bed with two women just before he left for a European tour with his band. He just now got back and is acting as if nothing happened. He thinks I'm being unreasonable, as if there is nothing to forgive — like I *could* forgive something like that. He says he's in love with me and that we can work this out." She stopped and took a deep breath.

"When he came by last night..." she continued.

Caleb interrupted her. "He was at your place last night?" That angered him.

“Yes, he said he’d just flown in from Europe and had come straight to my apartment. I told him then to leave me alone. But, as you can see, he didn’t listen. He found me here, just now, and kissed me. I slapped him, but I don’t think it did any good. You know the type.” She gave a small smile.

Caleb knew the type. To some extent, he was the type. This was the first time he’d ever seen it from this angle. The hurt, anger and betrayal he saw in Sara’s eyes convicted him. There were some women he needed to apologize to.

That would have been the end of it, except that Richard wasn’t done. He really loved Sara, in his own limited capacity, and knew on some level that she was what he needed. He had made it all the way to his car, had gotten inside, had even started the engine. But he sat there thinking, wondering if he shouldn’t try *one more time* to reason with her.

He turned the engine off and walked back into the studio looking for her. She and Caleb were walking through the lobby when he entered.

“Sara,” he said as he stepped towards her. Caleb put himself between Sara and Richard.

“You need to leave,” Caleb said firmly.

“Who are you?” Richard asked sarcastically.

“If you don’t leave, I’ll be trouble.” Caleb’s voice was calm.

“Oh, I get it,” Richard smiled. “You’ve got another one on the hook, huh Sara? Well good for you, darlin.” He looked straight at Caleb and smirked. “Enjoy my leftovers, man.”

Before he could stop himself, Caleb sent a powerful right smash-

ing into Richard's smug face. Richard fell backwards on the floor, picked himself up and shook his head, checking to see if any teeth had fallen out. He then looked up at Caleb.

"It's cool, man. It's cool." Richard made a placating gesture with his hands and backed up towards the exit. "I'm a lover, not a fighter." He turned and walked through the lobby doors. Just before they closed, he heard Caleb say, "You're a pig!"

* * *

At Sara's request, Caleb stopped by her place later that evening. He had been worried about her all day and had found himself looking out of studio windows, scanning the parking lot for Richard's return.

When she opened her door to let him in, he could tell that she had been crying again.

"Oh, sweetheart," he murmured as he reached for her.

She huf-huffed from crying too hard as she let him hold her. "I think I'm just having a delayed reaction to today," she explained. After a few moments, Sara stepped out of his arms and walked across the room for a tissue.

"By the way," she said after she blew her nose, "you were magnificent. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been there."

"It was all I could do to keep from tearing his throat out," Caleb grimaced. "What an ass!" He followed Sara into the kitchen and, while she got some water, he sat down at the table.

"Don't remind me," she said after she drank and clinked the empty

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glass down on the counter. "Now you know why I've been so leery of getting involved with anyone again. I sure know how to pick 'em."

She joined him at the table. "In my defense," she continued, "Richard can be very charming. He knows exactly what a woman wants to hear and exactly when to say it." Caleb recognized the *modus operandi*. He used it all the time himself. "I just didn't realize that he had no depth, until it was too late."

Things fell into even sharper focus for Caleb. He realized now that her desire to see them in certain situations before taking him to her bed came from her own pain and experiences, not from something she'd read in a woman's magazine. He knew that he was changing, but seeing her like this put it all into crystal clear perspective. His respect for her, which was already great, deepened that evening. Their relationship took on a new dimension, a new importance to him.

He felt like he had been a scavenger who happened, by great luck, to see a beautiful golden eagle. This eagle, which, to his people, represented the east and the sun from where all life came, landed on his arm. If he would allow her to stay and would care for her, she would change him from a scavenger to the most blessed of men, if he just had the wisdom and courage to let her.

"So," he asked, "can we count this as you having a really bad hair day?" He was trying to get her to laugh. It worked. Sara stood up and walked behind his chair. She leaned over and put her arms around his neck and chest.

"This, my dear, was a *very* bad hair day," she said softly in his ear. Caleb scooted his chair back, took her wrist and pulled her around

to sit on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her waist and smiled up at her.

"Kiss me," he said.

"Kiss you?" she teased. "Why?"

"Because it's an ancient Lakota remedy passed down from generation to generation, from father to son. It supposedly helps our women feel better."

"Oh, I see," she smiled down at him. "But I'm not Lakota."

"Ah," he raised an index finger and gestured, "but you *are* my woman."

She giggled, but obediently leaned down and kissed him. When she looked at him again, she was serious.

"Caleb, I've been pretty wounded. Are you sure you're up for this? I've got some triggers you don't even know about." She touched his hair. "You might oughta git while the gittin's good."

He looked into her eyes and understood she was serious.

"Sara," he said with conviction, "there's no way I'm walking away from you. Not now that I've finally found you."

"In that case, hold me — tight. And don't let go." She wrapped her arms around his neck. He felt the rest of that wall around his heart completely evaporate. She needed him — not for his money or for his looks or for what he could do for her — but for him, only for him.

When Caleb returned home late that night, he knocked on Matthew's door.

"Yeah," Matthew answered.

Caleb poked his head around the door. "You asleep?"

"Not yet. Come on in." Matthew sat up in bed and turned on the lamp.

Caleb sat down on Matthew's desk chair and leaned forward, elbows on knees. He began telling his brother about Richard, about their confrontation earlier that day, and about how angry Richard's treatment of Sara had made him.

"Do you think he'll be back?" Matthew asked.

"No. He doesn't have the stones for it." Caleb frowned. "What's killing me, *misúη*," he continued, "is that, to some extent, I've *been* Richard. Sara was a wreck tonight because of what he did over six months ago. It was like looking in a mirror. I had no idea how much damage my player attitude was doing."

"So, now you know." Matthew wasn't sure what Caleb wanted him to say. They sat quietly, Caleb fiddling with a pen.

"Matthew," he finally put the pen down and sat up, "I've never, ever felt so protective of anyone before. If it had come to it, I think I would have beaten his head in and felt glad to do it. Nobody messes with Sara on my watch. Nobody."

"Okay." Again, Matthew wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to say.

"It's scaring me, *misúη*," Caleb finally explained. "How much I care. How deep it goes. How quickly I got there."

"I guess it was bound to happen sooner or later," Matthew said. "But why is it scaring you?"

"'Cuz what if I screw this up? What if I wind up hurting her even more than she has already been hurt? I've got such a bad track re-

cord. If this doesn't work, what's left for me? Where would I go from here?"

"Your track record is history." Matthew tried to reassure him. "You've changed in the short time you've known her. You know you have. Just give yourself a break, will ya? You'll do fine. Besides, I think she'd let you know if you were heading off track, long before you actually derailed. Don't you?"

"Yeah. She probably would." Caleb stood up, feeling better having run his fears past Matthew. "Thanks, *misúŋ*. Good night."

"Yeah. Night." Matthew clicked the lamp back off as Caleb closed the door and went to his room.

CHAPTER 12

PICNIC IN THE PARK

The next day, Caleb and Sara had a few brief conversations and shared a few quick kisses in the studio hallways. But, there was little time for anything else. Sara was ramping up for her tour and was neck deep in business managers, booking agents, publicists, and lawyers. The Black Wolf Band was putting the final touches on its CD and was in the boring, but necessary, stage of remixes.

Sara did see Matthew for a few minutes, when he came looking for her.

“You got a sec?” he asked, knocking on her open office door.

“Sure. For you? Always.” She stood up and smiled. “Have a seat.”

“No. I won’t keep you.” He looked around her office, stalling for a little time. “Um, Sara, I just wanted to tell you that, well, I think you’re good for Caleb.”

"You do?" She was surprised by this admission.

"Yeah. He's never taken any girl seriously, well not as seriously as he takes you. I think he'd tear off his own arm before he'd let anything happen to you. And, believe me, that's new for him."

"Matthew, why are you telling me this? I appreciate it, but why?"

"'Cuz, for a while there, I was worried that you might get hurt. Not intentionally, but, I don't think that anymore. He's crazy about you. And I just wanted you to know that I think you're good for him." He smiled at her and nodded once. "That's it. See ya round."

"Yeah, okay. And, Matthew?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm crazy about him, too. What's more, I like all of his brothers — a lot."

Matthew quickly turned on his heel. He didn't want Sara to see that he was blushing.

* * *

Late that evening, the four brothers were bone tired as they walked out of the studio to head for home. Caleb wearily got into his truck and, as he put the key into the ignition, he noticed a piece of paper stuck under the windshield wiper.

He sighed heavily and got back out to get it. Once seated again, he started to ball up what he thought was a flyer and throw it on the floor when he caught sight of Sara's handwriting on the back of it. He unfolded the paper and clicked on the dome light.

"Lakota Man, we're too busy and I miss you. I just wanted you to

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know that you are the best thing that's ever happened to me. Your woman, Sara"

He suddenly didn't feel tired anymore.

The next morning, he left a note taped to her office door.

"Woman, I am running dangerously low on 'sugar.' I don't want to alarm you, but the situation is critical. Save me, quick! Lakota Man"

She answered within minutes.

"L.M. Got your message about sugar shortage. Am doing lip exercises and applying lip-gloss in preparation for emergency rescue. Hang on. I'm on my way. S."

"Caleb, I think this is for you." Jay handed him the folded note as he walked back in from a break. Caleb read it and grinned. This was fun.

Later that afternoon, Sara found another note taped to her door. Her eyes twinkled in anticipation.

"Woman – your rescue mission at lunch was a complete success. Victim has revived and is now going strong on the new influx of sugar. However, I foresee another shortage in the near future. Be prepared. L.M."

"What is going on?" Quin asked when he handed Caleb yet another note. "I feel like I'm passing notes in high school." Caleb just grinned as he snatched the note out of Quin's hand.

"L.M. Received your notification of future sugar shortage. I regret to inform you that the price of sugar has gone up. It will now cost you dinner. S."

"Uh oh," he said. "She just upped the ante." He scribbled a reply. "I'll be right back."

"Woman – message received. I'll pick you up at 7:30. Bring sugar! L.M."

Caleb arrived at Sara's promptly at 7:30. When she opened her door, he was leaning against the frame as if it took his last bit of strength to remain on his feet.

"Sugar! Sugar!" he weakly gasped, his eyes half closed, his hand on his throat. She laughed and kissed him.

"Sara? Is that you?" He shook his head as if coming out of a daze. "Oh, thank goodness. You got to me in time." He jumped through the door and grabbed her, reducing her to breathless giggles, as he planted a multitude of tiny kisses all over her face and throat.

With the 'sugar shortage' eventually taken care of, they went out to dinner and to a movie. Once inside the multiplex, Sara excused herself to go to the restroom. In the lobby, laughter spilled across the large room from different groups of friends. Video and pinball games pinged in the background. The smell of popcorn filled the air.

As Caleb leaned against a wall waiting for her, he watched people milling about and found himself listening to snippets of conversations as they walked by.

"If I don't get a raise, I'm gonna quit. I mean it this time." Two middle-aged women turned the corner and disappeared.

"So, what happened after that?" one teenage girl asked another.

"Then, I rang the doorbell and ran," her friend giggled. They, too, walked on by.

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A group of three young men stopped a few feet away from Caleb. One was short with dark hair, one blond and of average build, and the third was the tallest of the three, wearing a blue jean jacket.

"I hope this is as good as the previews," the short one said.

"Henry saw it last night. He said it was good," the blond said.

"Oh! Oh! Check her out," the tall one said. The two other men turned to see where he was looking.

"Oh, yeah," the short one purred. "I could do something with that."

"Man, she's gorgeous," the blond said. "And no ring, either."

"Yeah, well, I saw her first," the tall one stated.

Caleb looked beyond them to see who they were talking about. As Sara came walking through the crowd looking for him, the three craned their necks to watch her. She saw Caleb standing behind them and smiled.

"Hey," the tall one said, "she's smiling at me. See you losers later."

As the tall one approached Sara, who was oblivious to the attention she was receiving, Caleb stepped in front of him and took Sara's hand. He knew that he shouldn't torment these young men, but he couldn't resist.

"There you are," he smiled at Sara. "Kiss?"

She happily wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a long, sweet kiss. He put his arm around her shoulders and they walked down the corridor to their show. Out of the corner of his eye, Caleb saw the three guys scowling at him. He smiled smugly. Life was good.

* * *

Once Caleb had dropped her back at home after the movie and had left, Sara picked up the phone.

"Hi, Mom," she smiled. "Whatcha up to?"

"Hi, sweetheart. Nothing much. Just watching the news. How are you doing? Getting everything ready for your tour?"

"I'm slowly but surely getting there," Sara sighed. "Tomorrow, I *will* start bonking heads together if people don't start cooperating with each other. There's only one of me to go around."

"It will work out," her mother reassured her. The line grew silent for a moment before her mother, Beth, spoke again. "Was there something else? You normally don't call this late."

"Yeah, Mom. There is. I've started seeing someone — someone I really like."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. His name is Caleb Black Wolf."

"Black Wolf? That's an unusual name."

"The family is Native American, Mom — Lakota, a part of the Sioux tribes. And he has his own band with his brothers."

"Another musician, Sara?" The tone in her mother's voice was impossible to ignore.

"Steven asked me the same thing, Mom."

"Can you blame me? What's Caleb like? Is he from around here?"

"His family lives by Ft. Hood. His father was in the military. He and his brothers live here in Austin. He's great, Mom. Absolutely great. I want you and Dad to meet him."

"We'd like that, dear. I'll have to check with your father, first, though."

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He's got some business out of town coming up pretty soon."

"Alright, Mom. I'm pretty busy, too, but we'll work something out."

"Okay." Beth paused for a moment. "Sara, you be careful this time."

"I will, Mom. I promise."

"Well, then, goodnight."

"Night, Mom." Sara hung up the phone, feeling better now that she had told her mother about Caleb.

* * *

On Thursday, two days after their movie date, Caleb and Sara took a small break from all of their hard work and stole away to the park with sandwiches and sodas. It felt good to be outside in the fresh air. The warm sunshine felt nice on Sara's shoulders as she sat cross-legged on the grass while munching on her sandwich.

"Ahhh, I needed this," she said.

Caleb nodded as he reached for a soda. "It *has* been intense," he agreed.

"So, what are your plans for this weekend?" she asked. "No, wait. You've got Joaquin's birthday," she remembered.

"Yep." He opened the soda and took a drink.

"Have you gotten him anything?"

"Nope. It isn't Saturday yet."

"That is so typically male."

Caleb just grunted at her remark and sat the soda down.

"Will your whole family be there? I mean your sisters and all?"

Caleb looked up at her and wondered why all the questions. "Look, Sara," he said, "I'd invite you down, but it's really a family thing. You understand."

"Sure. Absolutely. I wasn't fishing for an invitation, Caleb."

"Didn't say you were. Just wanted to explain. That's all."

There was an awkwardness to the moment.

"What about you? You doing anything this weekend?"

"Hmm, I haven't really thought about it. Been too busy," she answered.

The awkward silence continued for too long.

"Something is bugging you, woman. What is it?" Caleb finally spoke, deciding to confront whatever it was.

She studied his face, wondering if she should say anything or just keep quiet.

"Well?" he pressed her.

"Okay, okay," she dusted the breadcrumbs off her hands. "I'll admit it. There *is* something." She looked down at the ground and continued, "After the show Saturday, when you were all at my place, I overheard Jay ask if you were bringing me to Quin's party. You said it wasn't a good idea."

Caleb looked up at the sky and then back at her. So *that's* what it was.

"Why is it a bad idea, Caleb?" Sara looked straight into his eyes. "Would I embarrass you in front of your family somehow? Is my

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being a singer the problem? What's wrong with me?"

"Oh, honey! Honey, no," Caleb reached for her hand. "That's what you've been worried about? It's not you at all!" He scooted closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

"I guess I need to explain about my family," he continued. "I probably should have done this sooner," he paused, trying to get his words right. "My family, being Lakota, has lived on or near the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota for several generations. My parents were the first ones of their generation to move away, when Dad joined the military. My brothers, sisters and I were born and raised away from the reservation. So, while we are Lakota, we aren't as affected by that culture as my parents are."

He looked at her to see if she was following him.

"Go on," she nodded.

"We were raised to treat everyone with respect and dignity. When you move as much as we did, you meet people of all races and faiths and backgrounds. A lot of the time, as military kids, we were completely surrounded by entirely different cultures. You learn to live and let live.

"But, my parents were raised on the reservation and they have a different perspective. They are fiercely proud of their culture and of their tribe." Caleb struggled for the right words.

"I think I get it, Caleb," Sarah interrupted him. "You are trying to find a gentle way to say that you're worried about bringing an Anglo home to your parents. 'Hey, Mom, look what I found?' Am I right?"

Caleb let out a big sigh. "Yes! That's exactly what I'm trying to

say." He was relieved to have this subject finally out in the open. He didn't realize how much it had been weighing on his mind, until just now.

"Okay, I understand completely. If it's not the right time, then I'll be happy to stay here in Austin."

Caleb cocked his head sideways to look at her. He thought about it for a moment and then said, "Nope. You're coming with me. They need to know sooner or later and I vote for sooner." Now that she was aware of the situation, they could face this together. It made it much easier for him.

"Are you sure?"

"Yep. I'm not giving you up, so they need to know." He kissed her quick and sweet and then asked, "So, when do I meet *your* family?"

"Soon, my Lakota Man, soon. Let's take it one family at a time, though. Shall we?"

* * *

Matthew looked sharply at Caleb when he learned that Sara was coming to Joaquin's party. He waited to say anything until he and Caleb were in their house alone.

"So, you told Mom you're bringing Sara?" Matthew asked as he grabbed a beer out of the fridge.

"No, but I will." Caleb was sitting in the recliner looking at some new music.

"Are you sure it's a good idea?" Matthew joined him in the living room and sat down on the sofa.

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“Well, they need to know sooner or later, *misúŋ*.”

“Do they? I know it’s getting serious between you two, but is it that serious?” Matthew took a sip of beer and then rested the can on the sofa arm. “I mean, you know what the folks are like. Why put them through that if you don’t have to?”

Matthew and Caleb looked at each other for a minute. Caleb sat the music down on the floor beside the chair and pushed the footrest in. “It’s getting that serious. All I know, *misúŋ*, is that I can’t walk away from her.”

“Okay. Then I’m there for you.” Matthew reached for the remote. “I just hope it goes alright,” he said just before he clicked the TV on.

CHAPTER 13

MATO, THE SPITZOTY

First thing in the morning, Caleb braced himself and called his mother. After the usual chitchat, Caleb finally mentioned that he would be bringing a friend.

Mrs. Black Wolf, although a soft-spoken woman, could be very curt when dealing with her grown children.

"You mean a woman," she bluntly stated.

"Yes, Mom, a woman."

"Is she nice?"

"Mom, of course she's nice. I wouldn't bring her home if she wasn't." Caleb was trying to be patient.

"What is her name?"

"Sara. Matthew, Jay and Quin all like her."

"Okay. See you this afternoon, then. Oh, Caleb? Get your brother

something nice.”

“Okay, Mom. I will. Bye.”

* * *

Caleb’s brothers had gone on ahead to their parent’s home while Caleb picked up his gift for Joaquin and then went to get Sara.

“All set?” he asked when Sara let him in.

“Sure. Do we have to leave right now, or do we have a few minutes?”

“We’ve got some time,” he answered.

“Good.” She gently pushed him backwards through the living room and shoved him onto the couch. She straddled his lap and sat down on his thighs. Putting her hands on his chest, she smiled, saying nothing.

He looked up inquisitively, resting his hands on her hips.

“So, Lakota Man,” she said with a twinkle in her eye, “how are you?”

“Well, now that I’m here with you, I’m perfect,” he smiled.

“Good answer,” she cooed, leaning in to kiss him softly, leisurely and then straightening back up.

“And you?” Caleb responded, “How are you?”

“Now that you’re here, I’m perfect,” she mimicked.

“Good answer.” He pulled her towards him and returned her kiss. “I’ve been needing this,” he murmured.

“Me, too.” She caressed his handsome face. “I don’t start my tour

for a few more weeks and I'm already missing you. I thought that if I stocked up on kisses now, they might last me through my trip."

"Thinking ahead. Good!" Caleb grabbed her around her waist and, with her still on his lap, laid them both down on the couch, with her beneath him, their legs tangled up with each other. "Let me give you some extras then." He smiled, but then became serious as he lightly touched her lips with his fingertips, then moved his fingers slowly up across her cheeks to her closed eyelids. It was as if his fingers were memorizing the contours of her face. He kissed each eyelid, each cheek, and finally, her lips. He wanted this woman!

Their kisses were sweet and soft, but soon turned hungry. Sara's hands moved across his back and shoulders, at first asking him for more, and then demanding it. She was kissing him with a passion he hadn't felt from her before. She undid the first few buttons on his shirt and began kissing his throat and chest. Caleb lost himself completely in the moment — in her. His hands found their way under her shirt, slowly inched up her sides, slipped under her bra. He pushed it and her shirt up, sensuously kissing her exposed breasts. After a moment, Sara arched her back and moaned softly.

"Baby?" he whispered, wondering how far he should take this.

"I don't *wanna* stop," she said breathlessly.

"We don't have to," he said. "Just say the word." He watched her think about it; saw the debate in her eyes.

"You're too important to me, Lakota Man. I will *not* ruin this by moving too fast." She kissed him once and then covered herself.

"Are we okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. We're okay." He smiled as he helped her sit back up. "For now, woman, we probably should hit the road."

“Okay. Okay.” She stood up and straightened her shirt. “Let me get Joaquin’s gift, then I’ll be ready to go.”

* * *

Caleb and Sara pulled into his parents’ driveway and got out of the car. They had made good time. A beautiful dog with golden, fluffy fur ran out into the yard yipping and dancing at Caleb’s arrival.

“Mato!⁴ Hiya, girl!” Mato wagged her tail wildly and nudged Caleb, asking to be petted. She then walked over to inspect Sara, wanting to know three things. “Who are you?” “Where are you from?” and “Did you bring me anything?”

“Mato, that’s an unusual name.” Sara reached down to pet the dog’s velvety, soft ears.

“It’s Lakota for bear.”

“She is beautiful. What kind of dog is she?”

“Mato is three-quarters Spitz and one-quarter coyote. We call her a Spitzoty.”

Caleb opened the front door and announced, “We’re here!” He stepped back to let Sara enter, but Mato ran in ahead of them both. Caleb’s mother stepped out of the kitchen into the entryway and looked at Sara.

“Hello,” she greeted her politely.

“Hello, Mrs. Black Wolf. It’s so nice to meet you,” Sara smiled. Mary Black Wolf was a tall, slim woman. Her short, black hair had streaks of gray through it. She had keen brown eyes and a dignified face.

⁴ Mato: pronounced MAH-toe

"Come in, won't you?" Mary gestured to the living room.

"Sara, come on in and meet everybody," Joaquin hollered over the combined din of the TV, three separate conversations, and Mato's excited barking. The living room was a crowded place with all of the Black Wolf siblings present.

Caleb sat Joaquin's gifts down on the kitchen counter and hugged his mother hello.

"Your father is out back."

"At the grill, I suppose?"

She nodded. "Take these out to him." She handed Caleb a platter, piled high with hamburger patties. Caleb carefully made his way through the living-room obstacle course of legs, feet, chairs, and purses to the open sliding glass door. He heard Joaquin introducing Sara to their sisters.

Caleb stepped outside.

"Hey, Pops. Here you go." He sat the platter down on the patio table. Mato's nose was sniffing dangerously close. Caleb broke off a little piece of burger and tossed it to her.

"What time did you leave?" his dad asked, while he worked with the coals in the grill. Jim Black Wolf — Jimmy to his friends — was a very attractive man. He was as tall as his sons, with the same chiseled jaw line and dark brown eyes. He wore his hair short, in the military style that he had grown accustomed to.

"Twelve thirty," Caleb answered, as he reached into the cooler and opened a beer.

"Made good time," his dad observed. "Traffic?"

"No. No traffic." His dad stood silently, nodding his head, as he considered this bit of information.

"I brought someone with me," Caleb finally said.

"Yep. Your mom said."

"Her name is Sara."

"Yep. Your mom said," his dad repeated.

"Pops, this one is special."

"Yep. Heard that before, son." Jim reached for the platter and placed hamburgers around the grill.

This was not going well.

"Well, at least come in and meet her." Caleb's suggestion was met with a meaningful silence.

"Okay, whatever, Pops." Caleb gave up and turned to go back into the house.

"You'll break your mother's heart, Caleb."

"What?" Caleb turned again to face his father.

"If you are serious about this woman, as your brothers have said."

"Why? Because she's not Lakota?"

His father just looked at him with somber brown eyes.

"I don't believe it! We're not here for five minutes and it's already a problem. I was hoping we could at least get through dinner first." Caleb went back inside, looking for Sara, Mato trotting at his heels.

CHAPTER 14

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JOAQUIN

Joaquin rose from the recliner, offering his seat to Sara, and turned off the TV that no one was watching. Once she was settled, he sat down on the arm of the recliner, taking on a protective role while Caleb was outside. He introduced Sara to his older sister, Linda and to Linda's new husband, Samuel. Next, he introduced the baby of the family, Elizabeth, who was only 16. Jay was sitting on the couch with his arm around a girl who was introduced as "Betsy, Jay's current girlfriend."

"Hello, Matthew, Jay," Sara greeted the remaining brothers. Smiling, she added, "It's nice to meet all of you." Samuel and Betsy returned Sara's smile. However, Caleb's sisters just stared at her, looking her over from head to foot. They were searching for any fault, any flaw.

Linda and Elizabeth were prepared to dislike Sara. Their brother had not chosen well in the past, so they had low expectations of any-

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one new. At first, they only knew that Caleb was bringing a woman to the party. But, the information that the family learned from his brothers — especially about “the kiss” that had brought Caleb and Sara together — hadn’t made them happy. Nor did the small detail that Sara wasn’t Lakota. The fact that this relationship seemed serious just made matters worse.

“How long have you been married,” Sara smiled at Linda, trying to break the ice.

“Not long. Six months.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I was very happy to find Samuel here in Texas. Just like Jay found Betsy. There aren’t many Lakota here.”

Sara didn’t say anything to that, though she caught the subtext loud and clear.

After a few moments of uneasy silence, Elizabeth blurted out, “Is it true that you walked up and kissed Caleb the first time you saw him?”

“Yes. It is,” Sara admitted.

“And you should have seen Caleb’s face when she did,” Joaquin laughed. His laughter was ended abruptly by the disapproving look Linda gave him.

After another prolonged silence, Linda said, “I’m kind of surprised that Caleb asked you to Joaquin’s party. I mean, this is a family gathering and you haven’t known him that long.”

“I asked Betsy here,” Jay defended.

“Yes, but Betsy has been your girlfriend for a long time now. She’s

just like family," Linda explained.

Linda's brothers remained silent, but Joaquin shook his head. That wasn't exactly true. Betsy had never been to this house, had never met his sisters or parents before today.

"I'm sorry," Sara said. "I don't mean to intrude. I can go if..."

"No. Please don't go. That's not what I meant," Linda lied. "I'm just surprised. That's all."

"You're not going anywhere, Sara," Matthew smiled, trying to undo some of the damage. "We're glad to have you."

Sara sighed, feeling self-consciously out of place. While she was looking down at her hands, wishing desperately for Caleb to appear, Matthew glared across the room at Linda and Elizabeth. The tension was palpable.

Caleb walked in from the patio, looking uptight. Sara caught his eye and smiled, but he didn't smile back. He strode purposefully across the room and sat on the floor in front of her, his back against the recliner, between her knees. Caleb was deliberately putting himself between Sara and his family.

He greeted Betsy, who only nodded in her typically shy manner, and then he asked Samuel, "So, how's married life, Samuel? You ready to trade Linda back for your pocketknife, yet?"

Linda smirked at Caleb, but Samuel laughed. "No, not yet. I'll let you know."

Sara leaned over to whisper in Caleb's ear, "Honey, your mom is in the kitchen doing all that work by herself. I need to help." Caleb didn't move.

"Caleb, let me up," she insisted. He twisted around so he could look

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at her. "You're staying with me."

"Is there trouble?" she whispered close to his ear. He didn't answer. Instead, he looked at Elizabeth.

"Go help your mother in the kitchen," he ordered. She gave an exasperated gasp, but stood up and headed for the kitchen. Caleb then turned his stare to Linda.

"Okay! Okay! I'm going," she complained as she, too, headed for the kitchen.

"Pops could use some help at the grill, *misúŋ*," Caleb suggested to Jay.

Jay rose without hesitation and, pulling Betsy up with him, went outside. Samuel followed them to the patio. Caleb, being the eldest brother, made him a little nervous.

Sara looked around at the only people left: Joaquin and Matthew.

"You sure know how to clear a room," she joked with Caleb, trying to lessen the tension.

"Quin," Caleb looked at his youngest brother, "we came for your birthday. But, I'm not sure it's a good idea if we stay. I don't want to ruin your day."

"'Cuz of Sara?" Joaquin asked.

"Yeah. You know how the folks are. I just talked to Pops and it ain't good."

"Yeah, I know. Linda and Elizabeth weren't making it easy in here, either. But don't go yet," Joaquin requested. "Give them a chance to get to know her."

"You knew it could get rough," Matthew reminded him. "Ride it

out. Give 'em time. They'll come around."

Just then, their dad walked in, sending both Caleb and Sara scrambling to their feet.

"Pops, I want you to meet Sara Bradford. Sara, this is my dad, Jim Black Wolf."

Jim looked into Sara's clear, blue eyes. He had to agree with his sons' earlier report. She *was* beautiful and he could easily see how she had turned Caleb's head.

"Mr. Black Wolf, it's an honor to meet you, sir." Sara extended her right hand. She knew instantly where Caleb and his brothers got their good looks.

He shook her hand. "Welcome to our home, Sara." He then turned and faced the kitchen. "Mother, the burgers are about ready," he announced as he walked away. The three brothers exchanged looks. Pops had been polite, cordial, but stiff. He hadn't stopped to talk with Sara. This didn't bode well.

Throughout dinner, Mary Black Wolf quietly studied Sara. She decided that Sara had kind eyes and a good face. This woman had certainly won over all four of her sons. Even the reserved Matthew and her shy one, Jay, were completely at ease with her. Her daughters, however, were another story. They were not making it easy for Sara, often speaking in Lakota, knowing full well that she didn't understand them. Caleb was becoming increasingly annoyed with them.

When dinner was over, the table was cleared, and it was time for cake and presents. Joaquin got his wish and was presented with a delicious German chocolate cake. He tore into the presents like there was a time limit on getting them opened. Caleb had gotten him tickets to a pro basketball game, which delighted Joaquin, and he was

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thrilled by Sara's gift: a sterling silver belt buckle with the letters B W in black onyx. He changed buckles right then and there.

The family was chattering with each other over cake and ice cream when Jim Black Wolf's voice cut through the room.

"So, Sara, tell us a little something about yourself." All chatter stopped as the inquisition began.

Sara swallowed a bite of cake and looked up the table at Jim. Caleb put his hand on her knee for reassurance.

"My parents live in San Marcos. I have one brother, Steven, who is younger than me. He is enrolled at UT in Austin. I am a singer/song writer and will be going on a national tour with my new CD starting in a few weeks."

"What do you sing?" Jim asked.

"She writes and sings the most amazing blues. You'd really like it, Pops," Caleb offered.

His father just nodded. "And, have you been to college?"

"Yes, sir. I graduated two years ago with a B.A. in music." None of them had ever even *attended* college, let alone graduated. Sara's answer didn't sit well with the sisters. They didn't like feeling out-classed.

"Tell me, Sara," Mary asked in her soft voice, "what does your family think of Caleb?"

"Well, ma'am, Caleb and I have both been so busy, that I haven't had a chance to introduce him to them, yet."

His mother's silence spoke volumes.

"I'm not surprised," Linda snorted, "Caleb's probably not educated

enough or white enough to meet your folks."

"LINDA!" Caleb's voice snapped like a whip.

"Well," she defended herself, "we're all thinking it. Someone ought to say it!"

Caleb started to rise up in fury, but Sara put her hand on his thigh to stop him. Ignoring Linda, Sara looked straight at Mary.

"Mrs. Black Wolf," she said calmly, "I have had the great privilege and honor of getting to know all four of your sons. They've told me about Caleb's past relationships. I think even he will admit that he has shown poor judgment in that area and I can understand your concern about anyone he brings home.

"I've also been told that you would prefer that all of your children marry within their people. I can't help it that I wasn't born Lakota. But, I can tell you that I love your son with my whole heart. His people will be my people and his ways will be my ways. I'm not asking that you like me, only that you try to accept the fact that I love him. Please don't make him choose between us. That will only tear him apart."

The room was quiet after Sara's words.

"Son, what do you have to say?" Jim asked Caleb.

"Sara's spoken for both of us, Pops." After another moment of silence, Caleb said quietly, "Sara, I think we'd better go."

They both rose from the table.

"Happy birthday, Quin," Sara gave him a sad smile and walked out of the room with Caleb.

As they were approaching the car, Caleb's mother came out into

the night, walking up to Sara. The two women looked steadily and honestly at each other. "I will not make him choose if you will not," Mary said calmly. They had come to an understanding.

* * *

The first half hour of the drive home was spent in total silence. At one point, Caleb took his hand from the wheel and squeezed Sara's knee, but the silence continued — their minds too full with the evening's events.

"Sara," Caleb finally spoke, "you were powerful back there. I am so proud of you." Passing headlights momentarily lit up their faces.

"I was so frightened, Caleb. I've never been more unsure of what to say in my whole life."

"Really? It didn't show." The silence continued for a few moments.

"Some of the things you said," he paused. "You love me with your whole heart?"

"Oh, Lakota Man, with my whole heart, soul and being." She laid her hand on his thigh. "I don't know when it happened, but, as I was speaking to your mother, I realized that it had."

Caleb felt something in him grow quiet — content — joyful, at last. He pulled the car off the road and parked it. After unhooking his seatbelt, he turned, reaching for her.

"Hear me, woman," he held her face in his hands, his voice husky with intensity, "I am *so* in love with you. I am so *deeply* in love with you." He kissed her intensely; his chest suddenly too small to hold his heart.

CHAPTER 15

POOL PARTY

It was a great party. The weather was perfect for it. Sandee, from the recording studio, was throwing it at her place for no particular reason at all except to have fun.

She had set up a big barbeque spit in real Texas style. The beer was cold and the stuffed jalapenos were hot. Texican rock-and-roll was playing through a killer sound system. Some people were in the pool, others in the hot tub, while others had gotten a volleyball game going.

The Black Wolf brothers were there, welcoming the break from their work schedule. They knew most, but not all, of the guests. Caleb sat in a lawn chair, nursing a beer while he waited for Sara. She had said that she would be along as soon as she could get away and pick up her brother, Steven. Caleb was looking forward to meeting him.

Matthew and Jay joined the volleyball game, one on either team. Both sides wanted them for their height, so it was only fair that they

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split up. Joaquin made a beeline for the pool. He loved to swim.

Joaquin hung on to the side of the pool and watched a pretty young woman walk up. She stood next to a table and slowly lifted her tank top off, arching her back and shaking her long, brown hair loose, like she had seen in shampoo commercials. Her ample bosom was barely covered by the string bikini she wore, which was exactly why she wore it. After unzipping her cutoffs, knowing full well she had Joaquin's attention, she wiggled her butt provocatively to take them off. Then, stepping out of them, she kicked them under the table. Still not looking at Joaquin, she walked over to the side of the pool and dipped her toe in.

"Oooo," she shivered, "that's cold."

"It's not so bad once you get used to it," Joaquin smiled up at her. "Just jump in."

She looked down at him and smiled. "Promise?"

"Come on." He held his hand up to her. She sat down on the pool's edge, took his hand, and then daintily hopped in.

"This is okay," she smiled as she moved her hands back and forth across the top of the water.

"My name is Joaquin, by the way."

"Joaquin? Hi, I'm Amber."

"Amber. That's a pretty name."

In response, she looked down and blushed. "Is this your house?" she asked. She knew it wasn't. She already knew that he was Joaquin Black Wolf.

"No. We were just invited here."

"We?"

"Yeah, my brothers and I."

"How many brothers do you have?" she asked guilelessly.

"Three. You might have heard of us. The Black Wolf Band?"

"*You're* with Black Wolf?" She touched his shoulder.

"Yeah. I'm the drummer," he said with a little pride.

"Oh, I can believe that!" Amber slid her hand down to touch his strong bicep.

Joaquin grinned and then waved at someone behind her. Amber twisted around to look.

"Who is that?" she asked as she watched a woman wave to Quin just before being kissed by Caleb.

"That's Sara, my brother's girlfriend."

"Oh." Amber wasn't happy with that news. She didn't want Caleb to have a girlfriend.

* * *

"Hi, baby," Caleb grinned at Sara.

"Hi!" Sara smiled back. "Caleb, this is my brother, Steven. Steven, this is Caleb."

The two young men shook hands, sizing each other up as they did so.

They all walked over to get a cold beer and then went to sit down in the lawn chairs.

"I understand you're going to UT," Caleb said as he popped his beer

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open.

"Yeah. Sophomore year."

"What's your major?"

"Electrical engineering."

"Wow. That's impressive," Caleb nodded.

"I hate to admit it," Sara sighed, "but my baby brother really is brilliant."

Steven felt uncomfortable being the topic of conversation. "So, Caleb, congratulations on signing with Sonica. That's got to be a big deal."

"It is. It really is. We worked really hard to get here."

"I can imagine. I know what Sara went through before she signed."

"Sometimes," Sara added, "talking to Steven was the only thing that kept me sane." She shook her head, remembering those uncertain times.

"You two must be close," Caleb surmised.

"Yeah. We sure are," Steven agreed. "How about you and your brothers?"

"Oh, yeah. We're close. Sometimes too close." Caleb sighed. "But it helps having them around, especially in this business."

"Oh," Sara exclaimed, "there's someone I need to talk to. Excuse me a minute." She stood up and walked across the lawn to one of the studio execs.

Steven looked across Sara's empty chair at Caleb for a moment, knowing that he needed to take this opportunity to speak with him

alone.

"When Sara invited me to this party," Steven said, "she told me how important it was to her that I meet you."

"It's important to me, too."

"Even though I'm younger than her," Steven continued, ignoring Caleb's comment, "she trusts my judgment."

"Are you trying to tell me something? If you are, just say it," Caleb said candidly.

"Sara is good at a lot of different things, but not at picking out men. She's been hurt badly, more than once." Steven looked directly at Caleb.

"I know," Caleb told him. "I met Richard."

"Richard? You did? I hope you snapped his head off."

"I came close, Steven. I *did* punch him."

"Well," Steven laughed, "that'll do." His laughter died as he continued. "I know I can't keep Sara from getting hurt again. But, whoever hurts her will have to deal with me. And I *will* snap his head off."

"Whoever? You mean me?" Caleb asked quietly.

"Man, I hope not. But you *do* have a reputation as a player." Steven frowned at Caleb in the late afternoon light. There was no malice in his expression, only honest concern.

"It's going to be all right, Steven," Caleb reassured him. "I love your sister. For the first time in my life, I'm in love with someone. There is no way on this earth that I would intentionally hurt her. And my player days are over. You've got to believe that."

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Caleb understood what Steven was telling him and respected him for trying to protect Sara. If the tables were turned, Caleb would have done the same thing for Linda or Elizabeth.

Sara returned and sat back down between them. "So, what are we talking about?" she asked.

"I was telling Caleb about how bossy you can be," Steven teased her.

"Yeah. And I told Steven that wasn't exactly news," Caleb added.

"Oh, now wait a minute!" Sara defended herself. "Someone around here needs to know what's going on. And it sure isn't *you* two!"

"Oh, is that your excuse?" Steven laughed.

Caleb threw his hands up in a gesture of neutrality. "I'm staying out of this."

"Smart move, Lakota Man." Sara patted his knee approvingly.

They spent the rest of the afternoon and evening enjoying the bar-becue, the music, and each other's company.

* * *

Joaquin and Amber spent the rest of the party together, stealing kisses when they thought no one was watching. When it got dark, Joaquin took Amber to sit in his car so that they could be alone.

"So," he said, his handsome face cast in shadows, "I've had a great time today."

"Me, too," Amber replied.

He put his arm around her. "I especially enjoyed meeting you." He nuzzled her ear.

She turned and looked at him with wide, innocent eyes. "Me, too." She was so beautiful, so sweet. She had been driving him wild all day. Joaquin slowly leaned in and kissed her. She kissed him back with soft, eager lips.

"Would you like to go back to my place," he asked hopefully.

"Sure," she whispered shyly.

When they reached the house and went inside, none of the others were back yet. "*Perfect!*" Joaquin thought to himself. He shut the front door and pulled Amber to him, kissing her hungrily, anticipating their evening together.

"Quin," she said after a moment, "why don't you show me where the powder room is and then wait for me in your room?"

"Sure." He led her down the hall.

"Is this your room?" she asked at the first closed door.

"No, that's Caleb's. Mine is down here," he said, pointing towards the door to his room. He opened the bathroom door for her and said, "Don't be long."

He went into his bedroom and panicked. It was a pigsty. Picking up the worst of the mess, he threw it into the closet. Next, he shook the sheets out, trying to get rid of all of the crumbs. He turned the overhead light off and the bedside lamp on. Then, he picked up his remote and turned the stereo on. Trying to look as nonchalant as possible, he reclined on the bed, leaning on one elbow, his hair spilling across his shoulders. Joaquin made quite a seductive figure while he waited — and waited — and waited.

Finally, he got up to see what had happened to Amber. He called out her name, but there was no answer. He went into the living room, to

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see if she was there, and found a note on the coffee table.

"Joaquin, sorry but I changed my mind. Please understand. Amber"

"Oh, this is great!" he said to an empty room. He flopped down on the sofa and turned on the TV, since there was nothing *else* to do.

A little while later, Matthew and Jay returned home and joined him, watching TV. Jay was raiding the refrigerator about an hour later, when Caleb walked in, after saying goodnight to Steven and Sara at the barbeque.

"Some party, huh?" Jay asked him.

"Yeah, it was alright," Caleb agreed and started constructing a sandwich with all of the makings Jay was pulling out of the fridge. When Caleb got the sandwich "exactly right," he picked it up and walked down the hall.

"Night, guys," he said.

"Yeah, night," Matthew answered.

Caleb went into his room and turned on the light as he started to take a bite from his sandwich. He looked up and discovered a naked, young woman on his bed — a naked, young woman he had never seen before.

"What the ...?!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no! Caleb, honey, wait!" Amber pleaded as he backed out of the room. "I've been waiting for you. You don't understand," she cried and scrambled to her knees, "I love you!"

Caleb turned to face the living room and yelled, "Does this person belong to any of you?" He pointed to his room with one hand, his

sandwich hanging loosely in his other.

"What are you talking about, *čhiyé*?" Matthew asked as all three got up to look.

By the time they got to his door, Amber had wrapped herself in a sheet.

"She's not mine," Matthew said.

"Mine either," Jay added.

Joaquin pushed his way to the door and poked his head around the doorjamb. "Amber!" he exclaimed, "I thought you left. What are you doing?"

"Ah," Caleb said. "We have a winner." He pushed Joaquin through the door. "You brought her here, you take care of her."

Caleb walked back to the living room with Jay and Matthew.

"That boy's got some explaining to do," Jay shook his head.

"You know what happened, don't you?" Matthew asked. "Those two were pretty tight at the party today. I imagine that one thing led to another and he brought her here for some romance. Poor guy. She ditched him for you." Caleb just nodded as he sat down on the sofa and resumed eating his sandwich.

Back in Caleb's room, Joaquin said, "I don't understand." He looked at Amber with hurt-filled eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just didn't know how else to get to Caleb. I really love him. If you would just tell him that, maybe he'll talk to me."

"I get it," Joaquin said quietly. "I've been played. Get your clothes on. I'm taking you home." He turned away, shut the door behind

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him and, not ready to face his brothers, waited in the hallway for her. A few minutes later, Amber emerged and walked past Joaquin to the living room.

"Caleb, please, if you'll just listen," she pleaded. Joaquin took her by the elbow and led her across the room and out the front door, with her talking all the way. "I love you, see? I go to all your concerts. And I really love you. Please, just listen ..."

When the door closed and they were finally gone, Jay turned to Caleb and mimicked, "I love you, Caleb. I need you, Caleb. I'll *die* without you, Caleb."

"Shut up, Jay," Caleb growled. "We gotta do something about that boy. He can't be bringing just anybody over."

"Then you talk to him," Jay said.

"No, I told him about Santa Claus. I think it's Matthew's turn."

"Not me, *ñhiyé*. I broke it to him about the Easter bunny." They both turned to Jay.

"Alright, alright," he conceded. "I'll talk to him when he gets back."

Caleb returned to his recently vacated room and called Sara.

"You'll never guess what just happened," he laughed.

When he had told her the whole story, she said, "You go easy on Quin. He's going to feel bad enough as it is. Imagine if the tables were turned and some young thing set you up like that just to get to Matthew."

"Point taken," he agreed. "But next time there's a naked, young thing in my bed, it had better be you."

"Agreed!" she laughed.

"So, what'd Steven think?"

"About the party?" she teased. "He thought it was okay."

"You know 'about what,' woman. Did I pass muster?"

"I think so." She sounded unsure. "He's so used to me bringing home losers, I don't think he could quite believe his eyes when I showed up with you."

"Well, we had quite a conversation."

"You did? How'd that go?"

"You've got a protective little brother on your hands."

"Oh, Caleb. I hope he didn't upset you."

"No. Not at all. I'm glad he and I had our talk. I think I answered some of his questions and put his mind at ease."

"Well, for what it's worth, he said he likes you. And I believe him."

"That's a good start."

"Honey, it's going to be all right. I survived meeting your family. Remember?" She gave a small laugh.

"Speaking of which," Caleb asked, "when do I meet your parents?"

"I honestly don't know. Dad is going out of town on business for a week. Then, I leave so soon and am absolutely swamped right up until the last minute. It may have to wait until after I come back from the tour."

"That long?"

"I don't know what else to do. I don't want you meeting them to be

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rushed, crammed in between business appointments with my lawyer and promoter.”

“I understand. I just don’t want to put it off any longer than we have to.”

“Agreed. And now, I need to go. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Sara.”

“Goodnight, Lakota Man.”

“Goodnight, baby.”

When Joaquin returned home, his three older brothers were in the living room waiting for him.

“Please,” he sighed, “I feel rotten enough already.”

“We’re not going to say anything,” Jay answered, “except that before you bring any ‘overnight guests’ home, you need to clear it with the rest of us. That goes for all of us. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Joaquin sighed. He turned to go to his room, too embarrassed to stay with them.

“Hey, Quin,” Caleb said gently, “for what it’s worth, we’ve all been there, *misúŋ*. I’m sorry that it worked out like this.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Joaquin knew it would be a long time before he forgot Amber.

CHAPTER 16

CLEAN UP ON AISLE 9

The next night, Caleb called Sara. He knew it was late, but he didn't care. It had been "one of those days" and he just wanted to hear her voice.

"Hi, baby," he said when Sara answered the phone. "Did I wake you?"

"No," she lied. "I was in bed, but hadn't gotten to sleep yet. What's up?"

"Nothing, really. I just wanted to talk to you for a minute. It's been a rough day and I need my woman."

"Oh, anything in particular go wrong?"

"Not anything major. Just a bunch of little things. I'm ready to strangle Quin if he doesn't quit clowning around. But, I think the rest of my siblings are safe." He laughed as he propped his feet up on the coffee table.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"Hectic. But that's normal lately." Sara sighed. "Hey, Caleb?"

"Yes, my love."

"I've got an idea I'd like to run past you."

"Okay. Shoot."

"Why don't you invite your folks up for dinner at your place? I can fix something really nice. We could ask them to my place, but they don't know me. Your place is familiar territory to them. They'll be more relaxed."

"What? Sara, you're joking, right?"

"No. I'm serious. I thought that maybe if we could spend a little more time with them *without* your sisters, it might make things easier for all of us." She sat up in bed and scrunched her pillows to a comfortable position behind her back.

"You're not joking." Caleb's voice sounded resigned. "You know that means we'll have to clean this place up."

"By 'we,' I'm assuming you mean you and your brothers."

"Well ..."

"Caleb, I will cook dinner, but I *refuse* to clean that place up. My shots aren't up to date."

"Okay, let me talk to the boys and I'll get back to you on that. If I'm missing limbs the next time that you see me, you'll know their answer was 'no.'"

"So," he continued in a sultry voice, "whatcha wearing?"

"I've got on my favorite flannel night gown, with lace around the throat and big pockets on the front. The hem is torn, but, hey, who

càres? I've got my bunny slippers on. Oh, yeah, and I've got my face covered in cold cream."

"Be still my heart," Caleb laughed. "Okay, so I take it you want to go to sleep."

"Yes, please."

"Night, baby." He hung up the phone, chuckling at the image of her in cold cream and bunny slippers.

* * *

True to his word, he discussed Sara's proposition with his brothers the next morning.

"You mean dinner *here*," Matthew said with real concern as he surveyed their domain, "with Mom and Pops?"

"Why?" Jay asked.

"No." Joaquin shook his head.

"You saw how it went at Quin's birthday," Caleb reminded them. "Sara thought things might go better if we could get them up here without Linda and Elizabeth pulling their little stunts. I think she's right."

"I don't know, *čhiyé*," Matthew shook his head. "We'd have to buy a broom or something."

"Yeah," Joaquin added, "What's in it for us?"

"How about a home cooked meal by someone who can actually cook — not just work a can opener and the microwave?"

"Hmmm," Jay looked at his oldest brother. "You know this means you'll owe us."

"Owe *you*?!" Caleb laughed. "After all that I've done getting this band going, don't you think you guys owe *me*?"

"Then let's just say this will make us even," Jay said.

"Okay then?" Caleb asked.

The brothers looked at each other and then said, "Okay."

* * *

Caleb called Sara after inviting his parents for dinner.

"They said they'd be glad to come," he told her. "Mom wanted to know if she could bring anything, but I told her no."

"Okay, good."

"Also, they'll be bringing my cousin with them."

"Your cousin?" she asked.

"Yeah, his name is Daniel. He's Pops' brother's son and my favorite cousin. He's a couple years older than me. Growing up, whenever I could, I'd spend time at his folks' just to hang with him. He lives at Rosebud."

"Rosebud?" she asked.

"Yeah, the reservation in South Dakota. Anyway, he's down for a visit, so he'll be staying with us for a few days. You'll really like Dan."

* * *

The four brothers picked the afternoon of the day before the dinner to clean up their place. They wrote the four areas/chores they

were concerned about down — kitchen, living room, bathroom and vacuum/trash — on pieces of paper and threw the papers into a hat. They considered the bedrooms unnecessary work. Then each drew their "assignment" from the hat. They agreed in advance that there would be no trading.

The groans that followed the drawing were truly pitiful, indeed. However, with Caleb's stern direction, they tackled their respective chores. They only had to send Joaquin to the store twice; once for a toilet brush and a second time for vacuum bags. Jay hauled the last of four, 30-gallon trash bags to the dumpster, then noticed that the box they came in was empty. "*Good timing*," he thought.

By the end of the afternoon, they were finished and inspecting their work.

"Not bad," Caleb nodded his head. "Hey, I just mopped that floor!" he hollered as one of them walked through the kitchen with dirty shoes.

"That's why I hate to clean," Joaquin moaned, "You can't relax."

The next day, Sara showed up at their door, bearing groceries. "There's more in the car," she said to Jay as he let her in. She walked to the kitchen, sat the groceries down and then slowly turned around, surveying the scene.

"This place looks great!" she smiled. "You guys did an awesome job." Jay smiled, feeling really proud of himself. Caleb walked across the living room towards her.

"Hey, baby," he greeted her with a long kiss. When he finally let her go, Jay was returning with the last of the groceries.

"I brought my own pots and pans," Sara said. "I didn't know what

you had.” All four brothers were peeking into all that she had brought.

“Okay, scoot!” Sara ordered. “This kitchen is now off limits to all unnecessary personnel.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Caleb chuckled.

Within a few hours, such tempting smells were coming from their kitchen that the young men couldn’t keep away any longer. Lids were lifted, the oven door opened and snitches grabbed, when they thought that she wasn’t looking.

* * *

Jim and Mary Black Wolf, and Dan, arrived at 6 p.m., as requested. Caleb’s parents had been surprised when they received the invitation from their sons and even more surprised when they learned that Sara was cooking. They graciously accepted, realizing what Caleb and Sara were trying to do. The fact that all of their sons wanted to help made it seem even more important that they get to know Sara.

“Mom, Pops, come on in,” Matthew greeted his parents with a hug. They walked into the living room. “Daniel!” Matthew hugged his cousin, “Good to see you, man.”

“This looks better,” Mary said in her quiet voice. The last time she had been there, she had been afraid to touch anything.

“Yeah, Caleb made us clean it up,” Joaquin said as he hugged her.

“Mr. and Mrs. Black Wolf, hello,” Sara said as she stepped away from the stove.

“Hello, Sara. Dinner smells wonderful,” Mary said.

"Thank you," Sara replied. "It will be a miracle if there is anything left to serve with these four constantly sneaking tastes." She flicked a kitchen towel at Joaquin.

Mary smiled, knowingly. "When they all lived at home, I had to make four dozen cookies before the first one hit the plate."

"Sara, this is Dan." Matthew introduced them.

"Hello, Dan. Welcome to the zoo." Sara smiled and studied him. Dan was almost as tall as Caleb, but not quite as handsome, though he had striking features and the same muscular build as his cousins. Sara thought he had a serious face, like he didn't smile much.

"Pops, hi," Caleb said as he walked down the hallway. "Make yourself comfortable." Jim Black Wolf sat on the sofa and looked around. Caleb greeted Dan with a slap on the back.

"How've you been, Cuz?"

"Good," Dan smiled at Caleb.

"Want a beer?" Caleb asked his father and Dan. At his father's nod, Caleb got them each a drink. "Mom, we've got some wine or soda or coffee."

"Soda, please," Mary replied.

Caleb had intentionally put Sara's CD on for his folks' arrival. When he returned with his mother's drink, his father said, "That music is good. Who is singing?"

"That's Sara," he answered. His father just nodded.

"Dinner is ready," Sara announced a few minutes later. The table had been set with the hodgepodge of mismatched dishes that the brothers had. Sara had done the best she could with what they had.

The food more than made up for the lack of matched place settings. She had made pot roast with carrots and onions, baked potatoes, tossed salad, rolls, and strawberry/banana pie for dessert. All of the brothers chipped in to help carry the food to the table. Mary saw Caleb steal a kiss from Sara in the kitchen.

The conversation was relaxed during dinner. They talked about the Black Wolf Band's plans and Sara's upcoming tour. They talked about Mato and her silly adventures. They talked about Jim's time in the military and where he had been stationed. They talked about Mary's flower garden. By the time dessert and coffee were served, everyone seemed completely at ease.

There had only been one awkward moment in the conversation.

"So, Dan, what do you do at Rosebud?" Sara had asked, trying to make sure he was included in all the chatter.

He swallowed and wiped his mouth with his napkin before he replied, "I'm a tribal policeman."

"Oh, that sounds interesting." He reminded Sara of Jay, when she first met him and tried to get him to talk. It wasn't going to be easy.

"So, have you got a girlfriend or anything?" She was determined to get Dan to open up at least a little. Sara wondered why the chatter at the table suddenly ceased.

"I've been widowed for the last two years. It was an auto accident, very sudden." He picked up his beer and took a sip.

"I am so sorry," Sara apologized, wishing Caleb had told her about this beforehand. Somehow, the conversation started up again on another subject and the rest of the evening went smoothly.

"Sara," Jim said, as he took his piece of pie from her, "this was a wonderful meal. Thank you."

"Yes, thank you," Mary echoed.

"You're more than welcome," Sara replied. "But, it really was a group effort." She smiled at the brothers. "They worked so hard."

"I see that they have," Mary acknowledged.

When the meal was over, Jay and Matthew voluntarily started clearing off the table. Joaquin went into the kitchen and started washing the dishes. Mary took note. Any one who could have that kind of effect on her sons had to have something going for them.

Later that evening, Caleb was standing with his mom outside, saying goodnight. "I'm so glad you and Pops came up. It means a lot to Sara and me." His mother smiled and, saying nothing, reached up to touch his face. "Mom," he continued, "I really love her."

"I know, Son," she nodded. "I see it." Mary started to walk to the car when she stopped and turned back to Caleb. "So does your father."

Jim and Mary got into their car for the hour's drive home. Much of the drive passed in silence. However, there was one brief conversation.

"Nice meal," Jim said.

"Yes. And they look good together," Mary answered.

"It's going to be alright, Mother," Jim patted his wife's hand.

"Yes. It is."

Back in the brothers' kitchen, Sara was happy. The evening had gone even better than she had hoped. When Caleb returned from

saying goodbye to his parents, she ran and jumped on him, wrapping her long legs around his waist, and locking her ankles behind his back. Caleb laughed and, under her barrage of happy kisses, carried her over to the kitchen island where he sat her down on the counter.

“You did good, baby,” he cooed. “It’s gonna be okay.”

She smiled at him with her eyes shining. Her legs were still wrapped around him as she pushed back his hair and leaned in for a long, leisurely kiss. Caleb held her hard against him, his hands moving sensuously across her back.

“Eewwww!” Joaquin groaned as he walked past. “Get a room, would ya?”

“Shall we?” Caleb laughed and looked at her.

“Shall we what?” She wasn’t following.

“Get a room?”

“Oh, no, Lakota Man. That’s only two down. We haven’t had our first fight yet.”

“Well, shoot, woman. If it’s a fight you want ...”

“Good night, Caleb. I really do have to go.” She hopped off the counter and onto her feet.

“I know,” he sighed, “but you can’t blame a guy for trying.”

CHAPTER 17

DANIEL BLACK WOLF

Dan had enjoyed dinner, had enjoyed meeting Sara, and watching his cousins interact. He had forgotten how funny they could be, how he loved their sense of humor. Watching the romantic play between Caleb and Sara in the kitchen after dinner, he felt a catch in his chest. He missed his wife, missed holding her like that, feeling her kisses, and watching her smile. He turned away, the memories too much.

Just before she left for the evening, Sara walked into the living room to say goodbye.

“You guys were just perfect!” She beamed at the brothers. Jay nodded from his place on the sofa. She walked up behind him and threw her arms around his neck.

“I mean it, Jay,” she said. “Thank you so much. *Mmmwha*” She kissed his cheek and then stood up. Dan caught the expression on Jay’s face. Instead of ducking his head and looking painfully self-

conscious, as he normally would, Jay was glowing.

"That's different," Dan thought.

Sara walked over to Joaquin and tousled his hair playfully. "Even you behaved yourself, Quin. And they said it couldn't be done." Joaquin just grinned at her.

"Matthew," she turned to face the recliner, where he was sitting.

"I know, I know," he raised his hand to stop her. Matthew looked at her sincerely, "I'm glad it went well. And you're more than welcome."

Sara returned his look with a soft, understanding smile. Dan picked up on the mutual respect these two had for each other. To get that kind of respect from Matthew took some real doing. He didn't let just anybody past his barriers.

Dan studied Sara a little closer. How had she gotten so deep into this family, he wondered. Beautiful? Yes. Friendly? Yes. But it took something more. Heart? A genuine capacity to love? What? He wanted to know.

Sara walked over to him and smiled.

"Dan, I am so happy we've met. I hope to see more of you while you're here." He was afraid she was going to hug him; she seemed the type. However, to his relief, she extended her right hand.

"I look forward to seeing you again, as well," he said as he shook her hand.

"I'll tell you what," she looked up at Caleb, "why don't you bring Dan over for dinner sometime soon?"

Caleb shrugged his shoulders and looked at Dan. "Sure, if Dan

wants to." Dan just nodded his head.

"If everything is loaded in the car, then I'd better go." Sara smiled one last time at the group. "Night all."

"Good night, Sara," Joaquin said.

Caleb put his arm around her waist and walked her out to her car.

"Okay, Caleb, be prepared to get officially fussed at." She poked his chest when they reached her car.

"Why? What'd I do?" He could see she wasn't joking.

"Why didn't you *tell* me Dan was widowed? I felt awful in there."

"Oh, that. I *am* sorry about that. It just didn't occur to me." He leaned his back against her car. "Like Dan said, it's been two years now. It hit him really hard and I don't think he's over it, yet. Actually, the whole family is getting kinda worried about him. This is his first time away from home since it happened. We're hoping this trip will do him some good."

He looked at Sara, so beautiful in the moonlight, and reached for her. "Am I forgiven?"

In response, she smiled and teased, "It's lucky for you that I'm such a softy."

When Caleb returned to the house some time later, he looked like a very contented man who had just been thoroughly kissed goodnight. Dan felt that pang in his chest again. Being around those two, for however short a time, was going to be difficult.

The next afternoon, Dan was at the house alone when Sara came by.

"Hi, Dan," she said as he let her in. "I left a pan here last night and

came to get it.”

“Oh, sure.” He walked with her to the kitchen. “That was a really good meal,” he said.

“I’m glad you liked it.” She rummaged through the cabinets, looking for her saucepan.

“There was a bloody battle over the last piece of pie, though.” Dan laughed at the memory of Joaquin threatening Caleb with a butter knife.

“Oh no,” Sara giggled. “Those boys lose all good sense when it comes to food.”

He studied her, the way she moved, the way she wore her hair. He had thought a lot about her and the dinner when he was trying to get to sleep the night before.

“You know,” he finally said, “they all think the world of you.” “*Now why did I say that?*” he silently wondered.

“That door swings both ways. Aha! Here it is.” She proudly held up the errant pan.

When she smiled at him, he noticed again how blue her eyes were. She walked towards the door to leave.

“I really liked your music,” Dan blurted out, trying to get her to stay. “That was your CD playing wasn’t it?”

Sara stopped and turned to face him. “Yes, that was me.” She looked into his eyes, his sad, beautiful, brown eyes. “Thank you.” She touched his face softly. “You are so sweet.”

“Bye.” Sara walked out the door, shutting it behind her. Dan stood there, both enjoying her brief touch and wondering why it affected

him like that.

Later that evening, Dan was reading the paper at the dining table when Caleb joined him.

"Sara has asked us over for tomorrow night, if that's okay with you."

Dan looked up from the sports section. "Yeah, that's fine."

"Okay, I'll call and tell her." Caleb rummaged for the Arts/Entertainment section. "Sorry that we didn't get to show you around much today," Caleb said. "It's been busy."

"No problem," Dan said. "I understand." He looked at Caleb for a minute and then finally spoke. "I really enjoyed meeting Sara last night."

"Yeah, she's something else." Caleb scanned the pages.

"She's awfully pretty, Cuz. And a good cook, too. How'd you get so lucky?" Dan teased.

Caleb just chuckled and turned the page.

"She came by today to get a pan," Dan continued.

"Yeah, she told me. I'm glad she was able to find it in there."

Dan waited for a moment and then asked, "How serious is it between you two?"

Caleb looked up from the paper at Dan. "It's serious — the most serious relationship I've ever been in. I really love that woman."

Dan just nodded and looked down to read about last night's game. Caleb studied Dan for a moment, wondering what that was all about.

* * *

At dinner the next night, the conversation flowed as freely as the wine. Caleb noticed that Dan seemed to light up around Sara and was very attentive. She couldn't get up to bring something to the table without Dan jumping up to do it for her.

Dan didn't realize how obvious his interest was to Caleb. All he knew was that he couldn't keep his eyes off of Sara. He wished he had more time to spend with her, but he was leaving soon to go back home. Knowing that Caleb loved her couldn't stop his own feelings. It had been a long time, a very long time, since he had felt like this about anyone. It was a relief to actually feel alive again. He had forgotten what a joy it was.

Sara knew that Dan liked her, but she didn't realize the extent of his feelings or that a conflict was raging in his conscience. Caleb watched Sara during some of Dan's more obvious maneuvers and he realized that she was clueless.

When the meal was over and dessert and coffee had come and gone, Caleb excused himself to go to the restroom. Sara got up and carried some dishes to the sink. Dan didn't know if it was too much wine, or too little time left in Austin, but he suddenly felt courageous. He walked up behind Sara, who was still at the sink, and turned her around.

"Sara," he said very softly, "please forgive me for this." He put his hands on her arms, leaned in and kissed her. But, not with a quick, shy kiss. This kiss was tender and lingering and genuine. This kiss was from a heartbroken man. Sara understood instinctively. Instead of recoiling in anger or surprise, she let him kiss her and then stepped away.

Caleb walked into the kitchen just as Dan kissed Sara. He ducked back around the corner to the hallway, stunned. "*I knew it!*" he thought.

"Dan," Sara took him by the hand, "come here." She led him to the table and they sat down.

"I can't forgive you, because there is nothing to forgive." She looked away, trying to find the right words, then looked back at Dan. "I don't know you very well, but I imagine you loved your wife very much. You still do." He nodded quietly. "I've noticed you watching Caleb and me together. I guess that's been hard for you."

"A little," he admitted.

"I thought so. Seeing us together has brought back a lot of memories for you. It's not me that you want, it's that life that you had with your wife."

Dan considered what she said and saw the truth in it. "Oh, Sara, I am so sorry."

She stopped him. "Don't be sorry. I completely understand. I think that maybe this means you're ready to move on. Don't you?"

He stared at her. He couldn't imagine moving on. And yet, hadn't he just kissed another woman? He was confusing himself.

"Maybe," he conceded. "Please, don't mention this to Caleb."

She looked behind him, where Caleb had just stepped out so she could see him. She realized he had heard their conversation. He nodded his head.

"I won't say anything," she smiled. "But I think, if he knew, he would understand, too."

"I know why Caleb loves you so much," Dan said seriously.

She stood up and deliberately changed the subject. "Shall I send the rest of the dessert home with you two, or will there be dead bodies by morning if I do?"

Dan laughed in relief. Caleb walked up to the table.

"Did someone mention dessert?" he grinned, laying a hand on Dan's shoulder. "You know we'll have to hide it from Quin." Dan only laughed in agreement.

When it was time to leave, Dan went ahead to the truck, carrying the leftovers. Caleb stayed behind to say goodnight to Sara.

"You were great back there," he said nuzzling her hair while he held her. "I think you said the right things to him."

"He kissed me, you know," she confessed.

"Yeah, I saw."

"And you let him?" Sara was surprised.

"Only because I trust you — completely, totally trust you." It was the first time Caleb realized just how much he trusted her. It felt good.

"Oh, Lakota Man, come here." She held his face in her hands and kissed him deliciously. Then she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again.

"You give the best kisses," she murmured. Caleb happily, contentedly, kissed her again.

"I'd better go," he finally said with resignation in his voice.

"Yeah, I know. Dan is waiting."

"Oh, Dan. I almost forgot."

"Then what?"

"If I stay here much longer, I won't be able to make myself leave."

"Oh, you!" She playfully pushed him out the door.

"Night, baby," he grinned and then turned and walked away.

On the ride home, Dan was feeling more and more guilty about what he had done. He needed to tell Caleb, to ask his forgiveness. Caleb could tell something was bothering him.

"You know," Caleb said as they pulled up to a stoplight, "Sara is the most amazing woman I've ever met. She's beautiful, charming, and very wise." He looked straight ahead and continued, "Any man would be a fool not to fall for her at least a little. I certainly couldn't blame anyone who did."

Dan turned to study Caleb's face.

"Caleb, I kissed her." He braced himself for the angry explosion.

"Like I said," Caleb looked across at Dan, "I certainly couldn't blame anyone who did."

The light changed and Caleb drove on, leaving the amazed and grateful Dan silent for the rest of the drive home.

CHAPTER 18

ROMEO, OH ROMEO

The days flew by so quickly that Sara couldn't keep up. This was the last day before she left for L.A. to begin her tour. She had worked very hard to keep her last night free, in spite of all of the pressures and scheduling conflicts that kept cropping up.

At lunchtime, she stopped by the studio, looking for Caleb, and found him in the lounge. He was sitting at the table with Matthew and two women she didn't know. Caleb's face lit up when he saw her. When she stood next to him, he put his left arm around her waist and, with his right hand, pointed to his pouting mouth. She laughed, leaned over and kissed him. One of the women at the table sighed as she discovered why her flirting was getting her nowhere.

"Hey, baby," he grinned.

"Hi, Sara," Matthew greeted her with a wave of his hand.

"Hi, Matthew," Sara smiled across the table at him, nodded briefly

to the two women, and then looked down at Caleb, "Can I talk to you for a sec?"

"Sure," he rose and followed her to her office. When the door closed behind them, he pulled her close and kissed her.

"I *love* doing this," he purred. "We still on for tonight?" He wondered if something last minute had come up to change their plans.

"Yeah, we're still on. But that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. After dinner tonight, I want you — no, I *need* for you — to stay for breakfast."

It took a second for her meaning to sink in. He drew back a little and studied her face.

"Are you sure?"

"Lakota Man," she spoke softly, "kissing you goodbye tomorrow simply will not be enough. I need to be in your arms — in your bed — to be completely and totally covered up by you. Leaving you is killing me!" There were tears in her blue eyes. Caleb couldn't stand it.

"Come here, baby," he held her tight against his chest.

"So, will you stay?"

"Just try and stop me," he murmured.

* * *

Caleb went straight to Sara's when he finally got loose from studio work, stopping only for wine and a bouquet of roses. She let him in

and grinned.

“Roses! You’re spoiling me.”

Caleb handed them to her and got a sweet kiss in return.

“What smells so good?” Caleb asked, walking over to the stove.

“Dinner! I’m cooking,” Sara sounded proud of herself. “We’re having chicken cordon bleu, wild rice, asparagus and strawberry shortcake.”

“Oh, man, when do we eat?”

Caleb opened one of the bottles of wine. They talked and talked and talked, before and during dinner, about everything.

“You know,” Sara smiled at him across the table at the end of their meal, “I am awfully glad that I took a chance and kissed you that first day, at the studio.”

“You and me, both,” Caleb agreed. “It was a crazy way to meet, though.”

“Crazy. But, for me, necessary,” Sara said.

“Necessary? Why?”

“I almost walked away without saying anything to you at all. I have been so afraid of getting involved with anyone again. I’ve gone from one disaster to another and just didn’t trust my judgment anymore.” She reached for his hand, “But, there you stood, looking so remote, so walled off. I knew that I needed to try one more time — not just for me, but for you, too. You looked like you were in the same place that I was.”

Caleb kissed the back of her hand. “I am *so* glad you took the chance. But now that we’ve got this great thing going, you have to

leave. It's not fair." He frowned.

"I know, Lakota Man, I know," she sighed. "But what else can I do?"

"I know what *I* can do," he smiled at her. "I will give you a sendoff you won't *ever* forget."

"You seem pretty sure of yourself," Sara laughed.

"Trust me on this one," Caleb said seriously, "I've thought of nothing else since we talked at lunch. And it starts with me grabbing a shower." Caleb rose from the table.

"Okay. But make it a quick shower, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am. And then, I'm gonna love my woman." He pulled her up from her chair and kissed her with a passion that he was no longer afraid to show her.

The shower water was running. Sara had just finished the clean-up work in the kitchen when there was a knock at the door.

"Mom! Dad! Steven!" Sara was stunned, as she stood holding the door open. "What a surprise."

"Can we come in?" her mother asked. Mrs. Bradford was shorter than her daughter by a few inches. She believed in going to the beauty shop once a week and had a very neat appearance. Her face was kind and gentle.

"Of course." Sara stepped back to let them in.

"I just got back into town and wanted to spend your last evening here at home with my little girl," her father said as he hugged her hello. Mr. Bradford was a tall, silver-haired man with a no-nonsense bearing. He was used to being in charge.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“We wanted to surprise you,” Steven grinned.

“Oh, it’s a surprise, alright.”

Just as they were walking across the living room to the sofa, Caleb, wearing nothing but a towel, walked out of the bathroom and down the hall, long hair flying, hollering, “Where’s my woman?!” He stepped out into the living room and suddenly, realizing they were not alone, looked like a deer caught in headlights.

To say that her parents were stunned would be a lie. Her father was in the process of sitting down when Caleb walked in and he was still holding on to the sofa arm, in a half-bent position, his head raised up and his eyes huge with surprise. Her mother took one quick look at Caleb and then closed her eyes tight. She wanted to know what was going on, but was afraid to look.

Steven flopped down in a chair and nonchalantly said, “Hiya, Caleb. How’s it hanging?” He was going to enjoy this.

“Please, excuse me,” Caleb stammered. He turned around and went quickly back down the hall and into the bathroom.

“I’ll uh — I’ll uh — put some coffee on.” Sara didn’t know what to do.

“Is that your young man, dear?” her mother asked, trying desperately to put a dignified veneer on this situation. Her father had yet to recover.

Back in the bathroom, Caleb was talking to his reflection in the mirror.

“Oh, this is good. This is just great! What am I going to do?” He had never been so embarrassed in his life. He had wondered many

times how he would meet Sara's father. But, never, in all the hundreds of scenarios he had imagined, did this one ever pop up.

"Okay, Sara needs you out there, right now. So — so, get dressed and face them." He threw on his jeans and shirt. Just before he opened the door into the hallway, he muttered, "And I thought Sara meeting my parents was rough!"

He walked into the living room, looking for Sara. She came in from the kitchen and stood by him.

"Mom, Dad, I'd like you to meet Caleb Black Wolf."

"Caleb, this is my mother, Beth."

"Mrs. Bradford," Caleb reached out to shake her hand, his long hair falling forward with the motion.

"And this is my father, George."

"Mr. Bradford," Caleb extended his hand. George Bradford reluctantly shook it as he stared hard into Caleb's eyes.

"We came by to spend Sara's last evening here with her." Her father laid down an unspoken challenge. Caleb received it, loud and clear.

"Are you all packed, dear?" her mother asked, clueless to the test of wills going on in front of her.

"Pretty much, Mom," Sara answered. "I just have a few last-minute things to throw together."

"Sara tells me you're with a band," her father said to Caleb.

"Yes, sir."

"I imagine that keeps you pretty busy."

"Yes, sir. There is a lot of work involved."

"Well, we don't want to keep you up too late, then."

"Dad!" Sara protested, as she realized what was going on.

"No, it's okay, Sara," Caleb interrupted her. "I probably should go. You need to spend time with your family." He turned to look at her parents.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Bradford, Mr. Bradford. Steven."

Sara took his hand and walked him out of her apartment and into the building hallway, closing the door behind her.

"I am so sorry," she began.

"No, no. It's okay," he lied. He hugged her close to him. "I'll see you at the airport in the morning."

"But ..."

"In the morning," he stressed. He kissed her once and walked away.

CHAPTER 19

FEEL THE HEAT

Sara returned to her apartment. By the time she had covered the short distance from her door to the living room, she was furious.

“Dad, how could you!?” she asked with her anger evident in her voice.

Her father looked sharply at her. She had never taken this tone with him before and he didn’t like it.

“How could I *what*, Sara?! You are going across country for months tomorrow and your family wants to spend time with you before you leave.” The logic was there. What didn’t she understand, he wondered?

“I appreciate that, Dad. I really do. But you were rude, inexcusably rude, to Caleb. I’ve never been ashamed of you until now.”

He was stunned. She was ashamed of *him*!? He wasn’t the one run-

ning half-naked through her apartment.

“Sara, I will *not* be spoken to like this!” he barked.

“Oh, yes you will, Dad. You need to hear this. I live on my own, pay my own bills and have achieved some measure of success in my career. I am a grown woman who is very much in love with the man you just chased out of here. Spend my last night with my family? Caleb *is* my family!”

Her words struck her father like a knife. “NO!” his heart cried. “You’re *my* little girl.” He sat silently staring at her, wishing somehow he could turn her back to 4 years old, sitting on his lap giving him “snuffle kisses.” The time went by too fast. He wasn’t ready for some stranger to steal his place in her heart.

“Please, please,” her mother soothed, “let’s not argue on Sara’s last night here.”

Sara and her father continued glaring at each other for a few moments, neither one backing down.

“I’ll get the coffee,” Sara finally spoke.

She had cooled off by the time she passed around the coffee mugs. She sat beside her father on the couch.

“Dad, you need to understand,” she looked steadily at him, “Caleb is not a fling or a passing fancy. I am in love with him.”

“Honey, I’m sorry. But I don’t know anything about him,” her dad said, “other than that he plays in a band. And, from what I’ve heard, that isn’t a very strong recommendation. I walk in here to find him running around like — like *that* and just ...”

“And just went into ‘dad’ mode,” Sara finished for him.

"Oh, George," her mother chimed in, "my father wasn't too crazy about you, remember? He couldn't stand to see you pulling into our driveway. But, he couldn't keep you away."

"But, Beth," he defended himself, "that was different. I was in love with ..." His voice trailed off as he suddenly saw history repeating itself.

"Oh, my," George shook his head. "I'm sorry, honey," he said to Sara. "I guess I'll have to remember that you're not a little girl any more."

"Perhaps not. But you'll always be my daddy." She kissed her dad on his cheek.

They stayed for a few hours. When they left, her dad offered to take her to the airport in the morning, but she declined.

"That's okay, Dad. I'll meet you there. Okay?"

"Okay, sweetheart." He kissed her forehead and then followed Beth and Steven to his car.

* * *

Caleb was almost asleep, after tossing and turning for a long time, trying to get his mind to hush. Just as he was drifting off, he thought he heard someone at the door and raised his head to listen. There it was again, a soft knock. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand, wondering who it could be at this hour. Throwing on a pair of jeans, he padded barefoot down the hall and through the living room.

"Who is it?" he asked at the door.

"Lakota Man?"

“Sara?” He swung the door open to see her standing wide-eyed and beautiful in the moonlight. One look and he knew why she was there. He pulled her inside and kissed her once. “Just a minute,” he said as he turned and hurried down the hall back to his room. Returning in a few minutes, he carried his boots and a shirt.

“Keys.” He held out his hand for them. “Let’s go.”

He drove them back to her place. Once inside, he dropped his boots beside the door and threw his shirt over a kitchen chair.

“Come here, woman,” he reached for her in the dark room.

“Caleb, I just couldn’t let you go like that,” she whispered. “I need you. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind?! Baby, I was going crazy. I am *so* glad that you came and got me.” He took her hand and led her down the unlit hall, towards her room.

“I had this all planned,” he smiled. “There were going to be candles and some music.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” she interrupted him. “Everything that I really want is right here.” She leaned in to kiss him, but he stopped her.

“What?” She looked confused.

“Take off your shoes,” he said “and then don’t move — not one muscle — until I tell you.” He smiled at her questioning look as she kicked off her shoes. “Trust me.” Standing close, he gently pushed her hair behind her shoulders and traced the sides of her face with his fingers.

“You are so beautiful — so incredibly beautiful. From the first time I saw you, I have been in awe of your beauty.”

Sara closed her eyes, letting his words sink into her heart. She felt him softly tugging at her shirt as he undid the buttons, one — after — the other — in delicious — slowness — until she thought she'd go mad from impatience. Finally, he pushed her shirt away from her shoulders.

"And then," he put his arms around her waist and kissed her throat, "once I got to know you a little better," he kissed her cleavage, "I realized that you are even more beautiful on the inside." He kissed her left shoulder. "If that's possible."

He walked behind her and moved her hair once again to unhook her bra. "I keep asking myself," he murmured, leaning beside her ear, "what I did to deserve such wonder as you." He slid the straps down her arms and tossed the bra next to her shirt. Still standing behind her, he leaned beside her other ear, while he pulled her against his chest and moved his hands around her sides and to her breasts.

"I still don't know, but I'm going to make sure that I keep you. You are my golden eagle. My pride and joy. My woman."

She leaned her head back on his shoulder. He heard her sigh under his touch, under the spell of his words. She started to turn around, but he stopped her.

"Not yet, baby. Wait." He kissed her neck and then moved his hands down her stomach to her jeans. As he was unzipping them, he kept talking to her in his smoky voice. "I've never loved a woman the way I love you." He slipped his hands beneath her jeans on both sides of her hips and pushed the jeans down to the floor.

"Fifty years from now," he whispered, "we're still gonna feel the heat from tonight." She stepped out of her jeans, now completely nude, completely in his power.

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Caleb took off his jeans and then walked around to face her.

“Yes,” he nodded. “Yes. You are perfection.” He held out his hand. “Come here, woman.” She looked at him and, with no hesitation, stepped into his embrace, into his kiss, into his love.

CHAPTER 20

LEAVING ON A JET PLANE

Even at 6:00 a.m., the airport was already humming. Sara's manager, Phil Hinds, was there, along with an assistant, Denise, who would be traveling with Sara. Her parents had arrived, without Steven, who had an exam scheduled that he couldn't miss. They were all sitting, making polite conversation, when Sara and Caleb walked towards them.

Her father watched them. It was the look on Caleb's face that finally reached him. No matter what George Bradford thought or wanted — that man loved his daughter. He could see it even from this distance.

When the couple got to the seating area, Caleb looked directly at Sara's father.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bradford, I want to apologize for last night," he began.

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George rose to his feet and interrupted him.

"No, Caleb. I need to apologize to you, as my daughter so clearly pointed out last night." He winked at Sara. "I am sorry we barged in without considering that Sara might have had other plans." He extended his hand. Caleb shook it as the two men smiled at each other for the first time.

Just then, Caleb's brothers appeared, much to Sara's surprise.

"Hey, guys! What are you doing here?" she grinned.

"Couldn't let you go without seeing you off," Joaquin said.

"I am so glad!" Sara hugged Joaquin. "Let me introduce everybody."

Introductions had barely been made when Sara's flight was announced.

"Oh, dear," her mother said. "It's time."

Sara looked sharply — desperately — at Caleb as they all stood up. He knew what she was thinking.

"Hey, you'll be back before you know it!" He was trying to reassure them both.

"You'll do great!" Jay said. "I'll be watching for good press."

Sara hugged her mother.

"Call us when you get there," her mother instructed.

"Okay, Mom. Dad." Sara hugged her dad, but not quite as tightly as he hugged her.

She then gave each one of the brothers a goodbye hug. She took Caleb's hand and they walked a little way down the concourse to be alone.

"I got you a little something." He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a small box.

"What is it?" she asked.

He gave her the box and watched her open it. Inside was a stunning gold locket with an engraved "S" and "C" entwined on the front. Inside the locket was a small picture of him.

"Oh, Lakota Man, it's beautiful!" She took it out of the box, handed it to him and, turning her back to him, lifted her long hair out of the way. He reached around to put the locket on her, fastened it, and then kissed the back of her neck.

"There. Let me see." He turned her around by her shoulders to inspect his work. "Yep. Right where it belongs — next to your heart." When she turned to face him, she was tearing up.

"Oh, no, baby, don't," he pleaded. There was a dangerous lump in his throat. "The tour really will pass quickly. Really. Besides, I can fly out to wherever you are and spend some time with you."

"Promise?" She couldn't help it. A tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

"Absolutely."

"I love you so much, Caleb." Her tears wouldn't behave. They kept coming, one after the other, leaving wet trails as evidence of their disobedience.

"I know, woman. I know. I can barely breathe because of how much I love you."

They held each other as tightly as they could. When he kissed her goodbye, he could taste her tears. Reluctantly, he let her go and watched her walk through the security check. He then returned to

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the small group, trying hard not to show his emotions.

"She'll be back soon, son," George patted Caleb once on the back of his shoulder. Much to Caleb's surprise, Sara's mother hugged him just before they turned to leave.

"You be good to my little girl," she whispered.

* * *

On the plane, Sara was trying to get settled. She couldn't see through her tears to fasten the seatbelt. For years she had dreamed of going on tour with her own music. She never imagined it would hurt this badly.

* * *

It was rare, very rare indeed, that Matthew had the entire house to himself. It was such a luxury that he didn't want to waste a minute of it. He set up his keyboard in the living room to work on a song he had started. He didn't realize what a striking figure he made, standing behind the keyboard, wearing only a pair of jeans, his hair pulled back, his body prime in its strength and beauty.

He loved his brothers dearly, but couldn't wait until enough money started rolling in so that he could get his own place. He craved the privacy, the quiet. Living with Joaquin "the monkey" wasn't easy for him.

His new song was a bluesy love ballad about a man wanting his best friend's girl. He had some kicking bass lines written for Jay and knew that he and Caleb could work out some really great harmony. Some musicians "get" the music first; others get the words. He al-

ways got the music first. The lyrics usually gave him fits.

I see him hold you and I have to hold my tongue

How can you be his, when you're my only one?

"Okay, now what?" He stared at the two lines, hoping they would volunteer the next two. He walked across the room to the fridge, got a beer, and sat down on the sofa. "Come on, man, think!" he urged himself.

Half an hour later, nothing. Absolutely nothing. He hated this part of the creative process — the part where it dried up.

Matthew decided he wasn't going about this correctly. He needed to get in the right mindset; to actually put himself in the picture he was creating. Leaning his head back on the sofa, he closed his eyes.

"Okay, I've got a best friend who has a girlfriend. Who's the best friend?" Caleb came to mind. "Good. Think about Caleb and Sara. What if you were in love with her and had to watch the two of them together all the time? What would that feel like?"

Matthew thought about it for a few minutes and then surprised himself with how easily the words flowed onto the paper.

I see him hold you and I have to hold my tongue

How can you be his, when you're my only one?

I want to tell you, but just what would I say?

You have to be mine; he has to go away.

I know he loves you. He tells me all the time.

But I can't help myself. You really should be mine.

When he kisses you, a part of me just cries.

I say nothing, but I'm dying from these lies.

LEAVING ON A JET PLANE

*I see you smiling and giving him your heart
But, girl, you're killing me. It's tearing me apart.*

*Why can't I tell you? Why can't I make you see
That you are really mine? Why can't I let this be?*

(Chorus)

*What's a man to do when his baby isn't his?
Keep his best friend or give her his sweet kiss?
What's a man to do when his baby doesn't know
That she's his everything? Her lover's got to go.*

He read the words — twice. “Uh oh,” he said to the empty room. “That came a little too easily.” At first he was afraid it had something to do with Sara, but that didn’t seem right. Then it dawned on him. Caleb had Sara; Jay had Betsy. Joaquin had the girl *de jour*. He had no one. He felt alone and he hated that feeling. He *really* hated that feeling.

Jay showed up a little while later and saw the evidence of Matthew’s work. The keyboard was still set up. Crumpled papers were strewn on the floor like giant pieces of popcorn. Empty beer cans and a partially eaten sandwich littered the coffee table. In the middle of it all sat Matthew, still contemplating his revelation.

“Hey, *čhiyé*, whatcha got?” Jay walked over and took the piece of paper out of Matthew’s hand. He sat down next to him on the sofa and read it out loud.

“Hey, this is good!” He smiled at Matthew. “Let me hear it.”

Matthew obligingly went over to his keyboard and played the song through.

"Let me get my bass," Jay said eagerly. In no time, he was set up. "Okay, let's do it."

The two played through the song slowly, getting used to the rhythm and the cadence. Jay loved the bass lines. He only tweaked them a little.

They were halfway through their second time when Caleb walked in.

"I heard you from outside," Caleb said. "It sounds good. Keep going."

"It's Matthew's," Jay said.

"What's it called?" Caleb asked.

"*What's A Man To Do?*" Jay answered.

Caleb walked over to Matthew and studied the sheet music. He picked up the lyrics and began humming as Matthew and Jay played. He read them all the way through again.

"*You* wrote this?" he asked Matthew.

"Yeah."

"Interesting topic," Caleb looked at his brother and wondered.

"Thanks. Are you gonna sit in with us?" Matthew deliberately changed the subject.

Later that day, Caleb went to Matthew's room so they could talk alone.

"That's a great song."

"Glad you like it." Matthew turned from his computer to look at Caleb.

“One question. Was that about anyone in particular?” Caleb asked.

“No. It’s just an idea I’ve had for a while. Today was the first chance I had to do anything with it.”

Caleb nodded thoughtfully.

“Actually, *čhiyé*,” Matthew continued, “I think that I’m just a little blue about not having my own girl. I need to find someone like Sara.”

“Good luck, man. She’s one in a million and I saw her first.” Caleb laughed, but he knew that Matthew was right. He did need a girlfriend.

CHAPTER 21

SWEET MELISSA

Sara was a HIT in LA. Her concerts on Friday and Saturday nights were both huge successes. The audiences ate her up. The trade magazines made note: “*Watch this new one – she’s definitely on the rise!*” Her head was swimming with all that was involved in touring, but it quickly fell into a pattern: arrive at a city, unpack and then begin several days ‘doing’ the local press junket on TV, newspapers and radio stations, giving interviews and posing for pictures. The hype builds, tickets sell, the performance is given, then it’s pack up after the last concert and head out to the next city.

Once L.A. was done, she was on to Denver: different venue, different hotel room, but the same routine. Sara called home frequently, not so much to tell about her experiences, but to hear about home. She missed the day-to-day trivia. How did Steven do on his last exam? What color drapes did her mom finally decide on for the guest room?

She looked forward the most to the calls from Caleb. She missed him. It was worse after a concert when she was alone in the middle of the night. There was all this energy from the audience and the performance and no one to share it with.

Caleb treasured her calls like they were diamonds. He threw himself into whatever work he could find. Keeping busy helped — some. Jay, true to his word, kept a watch out for her press and was saving the best articles.

Sara learned that Black Wolf was finally done in the studio. It was now time to herald the release of their new CD. To that end, their manager, Paul Ruiz, had hired a publicist. Caleb and his brothers were now entering uncharted waters. Releasing a CD nationally took much more polish than anything they were used to.

* * *

Publicist Melissa Guthrie was waiting for Paul Ruiz to show up at her office with his new band. Melissa was a good-looking 34-year-old of medium height, naturally blonde and always dressed in the latest fashion. She had worked in the business long enough to earn a good reputation. Hiring her was one of Ruiz's better ideas.

Ruiz was shown to her office. She rose, hand extended, to greet him. Behind Ruiz was the most magnificent man that she had ever seen. In spite of working with scores of handsome, charismatic musicians — in spite of her professionalism — she couldn't stop staring at this man. She momentarily forgot why she was there.

Ruiz said, "Melissa, this is Caleb Black Wolf, lead of the band."

"Mr. Black Wolf." She shook his hand and then met Jay, Joaquin

and Matthew in turn.

"Gentlemen, please have a seat."

Through the course of their meeting, she explained "the procedure."

"We will set up photo shoots for each of you individually and as a group. Some of the shoots will be done in a studio, but others will be outdoors, to get a more spontaneous feel.

"We'll also develop a bio for each of you; where you're from, how you got started, that type of thing. Just be warned," she laughed, "we'll change the boring parts to make for more interesting reading. Any questions?"

"Yes," Caleb asked, "have you heard any of our music? That would tell you the most about us."

"No. Not yet," she admitted.

"I don't have a CD with me, but drop by the studio and we'll play it for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Black Wolf."

"Caleb," he corrected.

"Alright — Caleb. Perhaps later this week," she smiled. "For now, we need to set up appointments to take your bios. From that, we'll start building a press kit. That will contain, not only your bio and photo, but copies of any reviews, interviews, or media coverage on the band, as well as a copy of your CD."

The week that followed was spent in and out of Melissa's offices — in and out of photo studios. All of the brothers hated it, but it was especially rough on Jay. He did not like answering all of those ques-

tions about himself. Posing for the camera was just as bad. "Move your head to the right — put your back against Matthew's and look at the camera — smile." Arrggghhh!

When the bio writeups came across Melissa's desk for their final proof, she was especially interested in Caleb's. "*He's single,*" she thought. "*Good, very good. 24? That's not too young.*"

Melissa normally didn't get involved with any of her clients. There had been one a few years ago, but he was ancient history. This man, Caleb Black Wolf, had gotten under her skin in a hurry. She had developed an itch and was determined to scratch it. And, as anyone who had ever worked with her knew, she normally got what she went after.

"Caleb? Hello. This is Melissa Guthrie," she said on the phone, early one afternoon. "When would be a good time to drop by the studio, you know, to listen to your CD? I've got to pick some up anyway for your press kits."

"Later this afternoon would be alright," Caleb suggested.

"Okay. Three?"

"Three will be fine. See you then."

Melissa arrived promptly at three. Caleb had pulled into the parking lot behind her, so they walked into the studio together.

"This is almost my second home," he laughed as he held the door open for her.

"That goes with the territory," Melissa agreed.

"Back this way," Caleb led her to his sound engineer's office. "Hey, Sandee, can you hook us up so that Ms. Guthrie can listen to our CD?"

In no time, Melissa and Caleb were sitting in a sound booth, listening to the finished product of months of work.

At the end of the first song, she smiled, "Your band is good. Really good!" She was honestly impressed. She struggled to take her jacket off, bumping into some of the recording equipment as she did so. Caleb reached around to help her.

"Thank you." She deliberately touched his hand a moment too long when she took her jacket from him. At the end of the last song, Melissa swiveled her chair to face Caleb.

"You boys are marvelous." She leaned forward and suggestively stroked his cheek with her right hand. "Simply marvelous."

Caleb sat straight back, moving his head out of her way. "Melissa, what are you doing?" He was stunned.

"Just enjoying the view," she cooed. Caleb rose to his feet. "Oh, please, Caleb," she stood up, too. "I read your bio. Neither one of us is married, so, where's the harm?"

He stepped around her to reach the door.

She continued, "I can't be the only woman who's ever made a pass at you. A rock musician? Oh, yeah, you know the drill."

"Ms. Guthrie," he said firmly, "let's get one thing clear. I might be a rock musician. I might not be married. But, I don't play that way."

"But, honey," Melissa was actually surprised, "it's being offered to you on a silver platter. I don't understand."

"You don't understand?" Caleb repeated. "Then I feel sorry for you." He stood just outside the door in the hallway, looking back at her. "Let's just say that not everyone in this business is cheap." With that, he turned and walked away.

Melissa grew angrier the more she thought about what had just happened. She had never been turned down before. She was the one who turned "them" down.

"Who does he think he is?" she fumed to the empty room, "a local guitar player. If I want him, then I'll have him or my name isn't Melissa Guthrie!" She picked up her jacket and, on the way back to her office, she wondered what her next move should be.

* * *

"Caleb, baby, hi!" Sara was delighted to hear his voice. He needed desperately to talk to her and had called as soon as he got away from Melissa.

"Have you got a sec?" he asked as he sat in the cab of his truck.

"Sure. What's up?"

"Nothing, really. I just needed to talk to you. Actually, I need to hold you — tight. I need to be giving you kisses right now."

"Oh, Lakota Man," she murmured.

His chest actually ached from wanting her. "I just miss you so badly."

"We'll have to plan a visit," she suggested. "When are you free?"

"I'll have to check," he said. "Our publicist has got us running in eight different directions right now. After that, we've got a graphic artist to deal with for our new cover."

"Okay," she sounded disappointed.

"But don't you worry, woman," he told her, "I will find a way."

CHAPTER 22

SAY 'CHEESE'

Caleb wasn't kidding when he told Sara that Melissa had the Black Wolf Band running in eight different directions. Besides the work they were doing through her offices, Melissa also had them out to 'be seen,' not only on local press junkets, but at any musical event of import going on in the state of Texas — after-parties, fine restaurants, wherever the action was, they were there.

Melissa hired photographers to act as paparazzi with flashing bulbs and clicking cameras whenever the Black Wolf boys made a public appearance. "*Create a buzz, and they will come,*" was a motto that Melissa lived by.

* * *

Sara hurried across the hotel room to answer her phone. "Hello." It was late and she wondered if it was Caleb.

"Hi, Sara. It's Jay."

"Jay!" Sara was surprised. He had never called her before. "Is everything all right?"

"Oh, yeah, everything is fine." He paused for a moment. "I've been saving some really good press releases for you."

"Wow. Thanks. I appreciate that." There was silence on the line. "I'm sure you didn't call just to tell me that," Sara said.

"Yeah, well, something happened tonight and you're the only one I can think of to talk to about it."

"Okay," Sara waited and finally said, "Jay, what happened?"

He explained the events of the evening. "We had to go to a party tonight; you know, a publicity thing. I was in the hot tub with a lot of other people and there was this photographer taking pictures." He paused.

"Okay, go on." To Sara, this felt like pulling teeth.

"Well, just as he was taking my picture, some girl next to me, who I *didn't* know," he wanted to be very clear on this point, "took her top off."

Sara couldn't help herself. She laughed.

"It's not funny, Sara," Jay said with an offended tone. "You know, of all the pictures he took, that will be the one that they run. What will Betsy say when she sees it? I don't know what to do."

Betsy had been Jay's girlfriend for some months now — one of the longest relationships he'd ever been in. She was a nursing student and from a conservative Lakota family. His musician's life often frustrated her. Sara remembered her from Joaquin's birthday party

and understood Jay's concern.

"I'm sorry. You're right. It's not funny," Sara apologized. "You want to know what to do."

"Yeah."

"Well, then, I suggest that you call Betsy tonight and explain it all before she sees it. You realize that her friends and family are going to give her a hard time about it, right?"

Jay hadn't thought about that. "Oh, brother," he sighed.

"So, when you talk to her, be sure to tell her how she can handle them."

"Good idea." Jay nodded. "Wait. How should she handle them?"

"Tell her that if she laughs at it and acts like it's no big deal, then they will, too. You know, if they say anything, she can come back with 'Jay and I were laughing about that last night. That girl will do anything to get her picture in the paper.' Or something like that."

"Oh." Jay said. "Good plan." He felt relieved. He had a plan of action, now, that he could live with and still keep his girlfriend.

"Thanks, Sara."

"Sure. No problem. Jay?" Sara said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm really glad that you called me."

"Yeah, me too."

When she hung up, Sara smiled to herself. Jay asking for her advice meant a lot. It meant an awful lot. She didn't feel quite as home-sick, as disconnected.

* * *

Since their 'talk' in the sound booth, Melissa had behaved in a strictly professional manner towards Caleb, never repeating her mistake of that afternoon. As far as Caleb was concerned, the situation had been dealt with and it was over. No harm, no foul.

Melissa learned about Sara through an off-handed comment. She was waiting in Ruiz's office with Mike Miller and Caleb. Mike avoided Caleb whenever possible, but it was inevitable that they would run into each other from time to time. Caleb personally couldn't stand the guy. But, out of professional consideration, he allowed him to continue to breathe. As the three of them sat in Ruiz's office, Mike looked over at Caleb.

"So, how's Sara's tour going?"

"Sara?" Caleb looked back at Mike. "It's going really well. She's playing Chicago this weekend."

"Good." Mike nodded. "I've read that the 'Sara Bradford star' is on the rise. Must be tough, though, with her on the road and all."

"We manage," Caleb said. "Besides, as soon as there's a break here, I'll be flying out to spend some time with her." Ruiz returned just then, but Melissa had gotten enough info to understand that her major obstacle with Caleb was Sara.

"No problem," she thought to herself, "I'll just remove the competition."

* * *

Several days had passed. "Isn't that Caleb?" Sara's assistant, Denise,

asked as she tossed a copy of a tabloid on the foot of Sara's hotel bed.

"What?" Sara crossed the room and picked it up.

Sure enough, there was a picture of Caleb and Matthew at some party with a woman she didn't recognize. Caleb was standing between them, with his arms across the shoulders of each. The woman was smiling adoringly up at Caleb.

Two days later, another photo in another tabloid showed Caleb with the same woman, her arm through his. Matthew wasn't in the picture this time. Sara tried to shrug it off, but it was bothering her.

A few days after that, another photo circulated, this time the *same woman* was kissing a smiling Caleb on his cheek. Caleb would be seeing Sara in a few days. She decided to wait until then to ask him about these photos.

What Sara didn't know was how carefully orchestrated these photos were. Melissa accompanied the Black Wolf Band to several affairs. She had her photographers take supposedly 'candid' shots. Then, just before the shutter clicked, on cue, she would do something a little provocative.

Caleb never realized what was going on, because Melissa would pose with all of the brothers that way. Back at her office, she would pour over the photos and pick the ones of her and Caleb that she wanted published. Melissa knew full well that at least some of them would reach Sara — wherever she was. She was clever enough not to doctor the photos, either. That way, there could be no denying the "facts."

* * *

SAY 'CHEESE'

Caleb was counting the hours until he got on a plane to Philadelphia, to Sara. He had run into Melissa at her office the day before he was leaving and had asked if she knew of a good florist to use for wiring flowers.

"You bet," she smiled. "I get a really good price from my florist. They handle all of my business. Let me send them for you."

"Great," Caleb smiled. "Here's Sara's hotel and room number. Get her two dozen red roses."

"Okay. What do you want the card to say?"

"Hmmm." He thought for a moment. "Sara, Can't wait to hold you. All my love, Caleb"

"Got it," Melissa jotted down the note. "I'll have them sent right away."

"Thanks, Melissa. I appreciate this."

* * *

The next afternoon, Denise walked into Sara's room, carrying a beautiful bouquet of roses.

"Oh, my," she exclaimed as she handed them to Sara, "these are absolutely gorgeous."

Sara sat the vase down on the table and picked up the card.

"From Caleb?" Denise asked.

"Hmmm — yeah — they're from Caleb." Sara looked upset. She threw the card down on the bed and walked out of the room. "I've gotta get some air," she said as she closed the door.

Denise walked over to the bed and picked up the card. "*Melissa,*

Can't wait to hold you. All my love, Caleb"

* * *

Caleb took the last plane out of Austin that evening. He was one happy man. Finally — finally, he was going to see Sara. All this time apart had made him even more crazy for her. They had so much to catch up on, to talk about — the success of her tour, the launch of his new CD, what they wanted to do next, both professionally and with their relationship. Mainly, though, he just wanted her. Once he finally had her in his arms, he knew he would be all right. All of this whirling commotion would settle down.

He arrived at her hotel door, sat his suitcase down, and knocked. It was late and she answered the door, wearing a lacy pink satin robe and nightgown, her long hair curling down her shoulders and back. Caleb stepped inside and pushed the door closed with his boot.

"Have mercy, woman! You look *soooo* fine!" He swooped her up in his arms and kissed her passionately. When he finally let her up for air, he said, "I have missed you, Sara. I don't like missing you." He looked deeply into her eyes and smiled. There was something missing, he noticed. Something was wrong.

"Baby, what is it?" His smile slowly faded.

"What's what?" she asked innocently.

"You look like there's something wrong."

"Oh, no, it's late and I'm just tired, that's all. It's been a crazy couple of days." She stepped out of his embrace.

"Oh." Somehow he didn't quite buy it. "I see you got the flowers I sent you. Like them?"

"They're beautiful, Caleb. Just beautiful."

He walked across the room and sat in one of the chairs by the reading table to pull his boots off. On the table was one of the tabloids with his photo.

"Ah! I see you've been reading my press," he laughed. "Jay's been saving yours back home. He's got quite a stack."

"Yeah, your press." Sara walked over to him and sat on the edge of the bed. "Caleb, who is this woman?" She pulled out first one, then two, then three papers. Caleb stared blankly at them for a second. There he was — his arm around Melissa — her arm through his — Melissa kissing him.

"*Where are the ones of my brothers?*" he wondered.

"That's Melissa Guthrie, our publicist. I told you that Ruiz had gotten us one."

"*Melissa!*" Sara's heart sank like a stone. That was the name on the card.

"Your publicist?" Sara repeated. "I guess that you two have to spend a lot of time together."

"Yeah. She keeps us all running. But she's good at her job." Caleb placed his boots against the wall.

"Hmmm." The tone in Sara's voice made Caleb look up.

"What? What is wrong?" Caleb was worried. "And don't tell me 'nothing!'"

Without a word, Sara picked up the florist's card and handed it to him.

"*Melissa, Can't wait to hold you. All my love, Caleb*"

"Oh, honey, the florist must have made a mistake. Melissa ordered these for me from her florist. They just confused the name. That's all."

"Oh, really?" Sara looked suspiciously at him. "Then how do you explain this?"

CHAPTER 23

FORGIVE AND FORGET?

Sara went to the dresser and pulled something out of the top drawer. She handed a thick envelope to Caleb. Inside were two airline tickets to the Bahamas leaving Austin the day after Caleb returned from Philadelphia. The first ticket was in his name. The second ticket belonged to Melissa Guthrie.

“What?!” Caleb didn’t understand.

“These were couriered over this evening,” Sara said.

“But, honey, I didn’t buy these.” His mind was reeling. What was going on?

“Well, that will be easy enough to prove. Is your credit card info on there or is it someone else’s card number?”

Caleb pulled his wallet out to check. After a few silent moments, he muttered, “But how can that be?” He looked up at Sara, his eyes wide with confusion. Those *were* the last digits of his credit card

number.

"Sara, why would I have Melissa's tickets sent here to you? That would be stupid." He was trying to reason through all of this.

"The courier said that these were to be expedited. You asked that they be delivered here tomorrow. They thought, though, that you might appreciate getting them sooner. They didn't know that you wouldn't be here to collect them yourself."

"Sara, I'm telling you..."

"Oh, Caleb, just be honest, will you?" she interrupted him. "If you're seeing someone else, just tell me."

"I swear to you I am not," his eyes were pleading with her. Sara and Caleb were silent for a moment, looking at the pain in each other's face. Caleb said softly, "You either trust me or you don't."

"I want to. I really do." Sara walked over to the newspapers. "I could ignore one picture with you and a woman — maybe even two with the same woman — but this?" She gestured over the papers. "You two were together everywhere, it seems, all over each other. Besides, Caleb, who would go to these lengths to 'accidentally' send the wrong card with flowers — or buy plane tickets with *your* credit card? It makes no sense to me."

"Oh, but my cheating on you does!" He was angry now.

"NO! None of it makes sense!" Sara held her clenched fists to both sides of her head, as if she was trying to make the raging war in her mind cease.

"Oh, baby." Caleb tried to put his arms around her.

"No." Sara stepped back. "Not until we get this figured out."

His jaw clamped shut as he went to white-hot fury that she didn't believe him. He stomped across the room, jammed his boots on, picked up his suitcase and the tickets, and slammed the door on his way out.

He made it to the hotel lobby, his mind still reeling, so angry that he couldn't think straight. Suddenly, one simple question rose among the clatter in his brain. "*Who would want you to break up with Sara?*" His mind flashed to the sound booth, with Melissa caressing his face. Then it flashed to Janice, kissing him backstage. "*Well, then, who else had your credit card number?*"

No one that he could remember — except — when Melissa suggested her florist for the roses, he had given it to her — MELISSA! He couldn't get to Austin fast enough. There was going to be a 'come-to-Jesus-meeting' and he was going to do the preaching.

* * *

Sara saw his fury, heard the door slam, and then burst into tears. She cried into her pillow for at least half an hour — she was so confused — so hurt. Finally, she got up to get a drink of water and to wash her face. When she got back from the bathroom, she reached for her locket on the nightstand. She wanted to look at Caleb's picture and think, really think, about everything, afraid that her greatest fear had come true. They had gone to bed too soon. Now that they had, he was over her and moving on. He'd never really loved her; he had just told her that he did. And yet, she didn't want to believe that. He wouldn't have lied to her about that — would he?

* * *

It was mid-morning. Melissa was busy at her desk. Two airline tickets were suddenly tossed into the middle of her work. She looked up, startled, to see Caleb standing there. She hadn't heard him come in.

"Hi," she said, searching his face for his emotion. "What brings you here? I thought you were in Philly."

He quietly closed her office door and purposefully strode behind her desk. Grabbing her face, he squeezed it with his powerful right hand, his expression thunderous.

"I don't know what you're playing at, but you've crossed the line," he hissed. "First the photos, then the flowers, and now these." He jabbed towards the tickets. "I told you I wasn't interested! So, you decide that tormenting Sara and me will get me to change my mind? Now, she thinks I'm cheating on her and lying to her about it! And that's exactly what you wanted."

Melissa knew it was useless to deny any of the accusations. She could see its futility in Caleb's eyes. She slowly moved her hand up and pushed his away.

"Why?!" Caleb demanded to know, towering over her.

She made a placating gesture with her hands, raising both hands, palms out, to her shoulders.

"Okay, I'll tell you." She stood up and walked over to look out of her window, her arms folded. "It's really pretty simple. I wanted you."

"And?"

"And you turned me down. No one turns me down. I figured that if you and Sara were through, I'd have a chance." She faced him.

"You weren't supposed to figure out who sent those tickets."

"But your name was on them. Who was I suppose to think sent them?"

"I was hoping by the time that you figured out the credit card angle — if you figured it out — you two would be over and you and I would have gotten closer."

"You mean into bed!" Caleb was so disgusted that his stomach hurt. "Melissa, why on earth would I get into bed with you? Are you really that vain?"

Melissa had thought about apologizing and trying to smooth things over, but his last remarks infuriated her. In her world, she made and broke a dozen like him before breakfast every day. No one insulted her without paying for it.

"By the way, you're fired." Caleb slammed the door on his way out, not waiting for her to say anything. She stood at the window, seething, and watched him pull out of the parking lot. Walking over to her desk, she picked up the phone and asked her secretary to get Sara's hotel for her. The call was ready in a matter of seconds.

"Hello. Yes, I'm Caleb Black Wolf's publicist and he's asked that I leave a message for Ms. Sara Bradford. — No. Don't ring her room, just please take a message. — Ready? *Sara, I'm sorry that you don't believe me, but no one calls me a liar. There's nothing more to say except that we're through. Caleb.* Did you get that? — Yes, it is too bad, isn't it? — All right. Thank you."

Melissa hung up the phone and smiled to the empty room. Now, who was getting the last word?

* * *

Sara answered the knock on her door later that morning.

"Ms. Bradford?"

"Yes," she told the porter.

"This message was called in for you."

"Oh, thanks." She took it and reached for her purse to get a tip.

"That's not necessary," he said as he backed away from the door. He knew what the note was about. Everyone at the front desk did. He felt sorry for the pretty, young woman.

Sara opened the envelope, curious about who would leave a message rather than call. She read it — several times — before the letters quit floating on the paper and settled down to form words — and the words settled down to form sentences — and the sentences settled down to form a meaning — a meaning that broke her heart into a thousand tiny pieces of piercing pain. She had Denise return Caleb's locket for her, no letter necessary.

* * *

Caleb entered his front door and threw his keys on the table.

"What are you doing here?" Jay looked up from the TV. "I thought that you were with Sara in Philadelphia."

"Yeah, well, change of plans." Caleb walked through the living room, down the hall and into his room.

Matthew shot a look of concern at Jay. "Something's wrong." Matthew got up and went to Caleb's room.

"Hey, *čhiyé*," Matthew talked to the closed door. "Let me in."

"Yeah, okay. Come on in," Caleb's muffled voice answered.

Matthew walked in to find Caleb sitting at the top of his bed, his head leaning back against the headboard.

"So, what happened?" Matthew sat on the desk chair. His question was met with silence.

"Okay, Caleb, spill it," Matthew ordered.

Caleb brought his head forward and looked at Matthew, pain and anger evident in his eyes.

"I was set up, *misúŋ*," Caleb shook his head, still in disbelief. He then poured out the whole sordid story to a shocked Matthew.

"So, is Melissa still alive?" Matthew asked at the end.

"Barely. You don't know how badly I wanted to choke the life out of that — that..." He held his right hand up, recalling the feel of her face being crushed by his fingers.

"What about Sara?"

"What about her?"

"You can't just leave things like that, *čhiyé*. You gotta talk to her."

"Yeah, but not right now. I can't get over that she didn't believe me! I've been down that road too many times and I'm not going there again."

Caleb wrestled with his dilemma for two days. Could he get past her mistrust or not? On the afternoon of the third day, he got some mail that made his mind up for him. In a small, brown manila envelope with a Philadelphia postmark was the locket he had given Sara. There was no letter or word of explanation with it. He held it in his hands and felt his heart splinter.

CHAPTER 24

LAKOTA MAN

Several days had passed since Caleb's visit. Sara couldn't sleep — again. She clicked on the TV and selected a late-late night talk show, hoping it would distract her. To her surprise, the Black Wolf Band was playing. She was glued to the TV, unable to take her eyes off of Caleb. The boys, her boys, did very well. Watching them made her homesick. After the commercial break, they were seated next to the host to promote their new CD.

In the middle of the interview, the host said to Caleb, "So the women in this audience want to know if you're married."

"No." Caleb blushed at the 'woooos' that erupted from them. Sara laughed.

The host waved his hand to calm the crowd down. "Looking hopeful, ladies. My next question is 'are you seeing any one?'"

Caleb's face tensed for a second. Sara saw it clearly.

"Well, I was, but — no. Not anymore."

Sara went completely numb as she turned the TV off. "So that's really it, then," she murmured to herself. She had been hoping that note was a mistake, that he had changed his mind once he calmed down. Now she knew — it really *was* over.

The next day, as soon as she could, Sara called her brother.

"Steven?"

"What's wrong?" he asked, knowing that tone in her voice all too well.

"It's over. He left me."

"Oh, man!" Steven felt his heart sink. He had really liked Caleb. "What happened?"

Sara explained as best she could her version of events. "He is so upset that I didn't believe him, he won't even call."

"So, why haven't you called him?" Steven asked.

"Because I don't know what to say. I accused him of seeing someone else. I really don't think he wants to hear from me. You didn't see how angry he was."

"Well, *was* he seeing someone else?"

"I don't know!" she wailed in frustration. "I honestly don't know."

"Okay, Sis." Steven was resigned. He couldn't reason with her when she was like this. "Just do me a favor. Give yourself time to get over this guy and don't go kissing any more strangers, huh?" He was trying to get her to laugh. Instead, he heard her crying on the other end of the phone.

"Hey, Sis. Come on," he pleaded. He hated hearing her cry.

"I'm sorry, Steven," she said between sobs. "This just hurts so bad; worse than any of the others. I really love him."

* * *

The next afternoon, once his last class was out, Steven went straight to Caleb's house. When he knocked on the door, Joaquin answered, recognizing Steven from their introduction at the barbeque.

"Hi, Steven," Joaquin smiled.

"Hi. Is Caleb here?" Steven didn't smile back. He was in no mood for a chat.

"He's in here," Joaquin pointed back over his shoulder with his thumb.

"Thanks. Can I come in?"

"Sure." Joaquin stepped out of the way to let Steven by.

Caleb was sitting on the edge of the recliner, hunched over his guitar, intently working on a new riff. Matthew looked over his shoulder from his place at the dining table to see who was at the door.

"What the *hell* did you do to my sister?" Steven growled as he took three steps into the room.

Caleb's head snapped up as he looked at him in offended astonishment. "What did *I* do?" he retorted defensively.

"I thought that you were going to be different." Steven jabbed an accusatory finger towards Caleb. "But, no! You're just another low-life player. Jerk!!!" He wanted to hit Caleb, but he was outnumbered, surrounded by Caleb's brothers.

“But...”

Before Caleb could continue, Steven turned on his heel and left, slamming the front door behind him. Joaquin grimaced across the room at Caleb. Caleb slumped back in the recliner, staring at the door. What just happened?

The encounter didn't last 30 seconds, but it stayed with both Steven and Caleb for a long time.

* * *

Sara's performances took on a new depth, a new dimension. While she had been amazing audiences before, now, at the end of some songs, they sat in silence — in awe of the pain she expressed. Her newest song was blowing them away.

*Lakota Man – you sang to me.
Love's music brought me back to life.
All my troubles, deep as the sea,
disappeared completely in your arms.*

*Lakota Man – it all went wrong.
I couldn't hear you through angry notes.
I need you and love's song.
My heart is crying in this dark.*

*Lakota Man – your voice is still.
What happened to it – to your song?
You are gone. I've no will.
My soul is scattered in the wind.*

(Chorus:)

*Lakota Man, Lakota Man,
What happened to the trust?
Lakota Man, Lakota Man,
I weep for you – for us.*

* * *

The Black Wolf Band had been busy giving concerts and promoting its CD. While they weren't on an official tour, sometimes it felt like it to the brothers. They never seemed to be home. They were developing a larger fan base and more and more concerts were sold out.

For all of the band's success, however, Caleb wasn't enjoying it. It was like sawdust in his mouth. He would play with technical precision, sing in perfect pitch, but his heart wasn't in it. He was simply going through the motions. His brothers knew he was eating his heart out over Sara and, yet, they couldn't do anything that seemed to help. The mere mention of her just worsened his already black mood. They soon learned to tiptoe around that sore subject.

A small group of people surrounded the band whenever it was on the road — technical assistants for sound and lighting, as well as "roadies" for handling amplifiers and instruments. They formed their own type of family. It was clear, however, that as the leader of the band, Caleb was also in charge of the whole group. He was the one with the ultimate power, the last word.

People knew he was in charge and acted accordingly. His ideas were always 'brilliant,' his suggestions taken as law. Blame for any mistakes he made was quickly assigned to others. The crew always assured him that it wasn't his fault. "Oh, the sound mix wasn't

right,” or “the lighting was distracting.” This constant barrage of ‘yes-ism’ was starting to have its effect. He was starting to believe his own hype.

Late one afternoon in Memphis, the band was running through a sound check and quick rehearsal a few hours before a concert. Things had been snarling up, literally and figuratively. Wiring kept shorting out. Equipment quit working. Miscommunication was rife. During a lull, waiting for yet another snafu to be fixed, Caleb sat on the edge of the stage, his shoulders slumped, a beer in his hand.

“Hi. Mind some company?” Olivia was one of his lighting technicians. She was a leggy, young woman with chestnut hair and hazel eyes. She wasn’t beautiful, but cute.

“Suit yourself,” Caleb said as he took the last swig of beer, crumpled the can and tossed it over his shoulder. It skittered loudly across the wooden floor.

Olivia sat down next to him. “Rough day, huh?”

“Typical’s more like it,” Caleb grunted. They sat for a moment in silence.

“Well, for what it’s worth, the lighting seems to be working now,” Olivia said, trying to get a conversation going. Caleb just nodded once. He wasn’t feeling particularly sociable.

“Say, are you going to the party later? I hear it’s going to be good.” She tried again.

“Hadn’t thought much about it,” Caleb said with disinterest.

“Oh, well, if you want to, let me know and I’ll go with you.” Olivia smiled and got up. He said nothing. He didn’t even look up, so she walked away.

The concert that night was good, in spite of the problems they had had earlier that day, but not great. Caleb had been drinking before the performance. It was becoming more and more the rule, rather than the exception. Matthew had tried to speak to Caleb about it, but without success.

After the concert, Caleb went back to his hotel room, opened another beer and propped himself up on the bed to watch some TV. There was a knock on his door. When he opened it, Olivia stood there.

"Hey, I'm headed for the party," she smiled. She had changed into a lovely, dark green blouse that complemented her chestnut hair. "Wanna come?"

Caleb frowned at her. "Thanks for the invite, but I'm just gonna kick back here." He started to close the door, but she put her hand out and stopped him.

"Look, Caleb, you've been either working or cooped up in your room for too long. You need to get out." Olivia held out her hand. "Come on. Let's go."

Caleb thought about it for a moment, while he looked into her pixie face, her inviting eyes. He picked up the key to his room and said, "Okay. Why not?"

The party was at the hotel poolside. There were a lot of people there that Caleb didn't know. But, that was typical of these kinds of parties. Someone knew someone who got them in. At least 200 people crowded around the pool and spilled onto the well-groomed lawn. Alcohol was flowing and music was playing loudly.

It was a beautiful Tennessee night, balmy, with a soft breeze and moonlight. Tiki torches shed a soft, flickering, golden light. The aqua pool shimmered with the glow of underwater lighting. People

were enjoying themselves.

Olivia led Caleb to a table at the outer corner of the patio, where they sat down. Caleb was still carrying the beer he had brought from his room.

"Now, isn't this better?" Olivia asked. When Caleb only shrugged his shoulders, she said, "Well, I'm going to get me something to drink. I'll be right back." Caleb watched her walk away, noticing her tight jeans.

"Hey, *čhiyé*," Joaquin came over to him. "Surprised to see you out."

"Yeah, well." Caleb motioned for his brother to sit down.

"Good concert tonight," Joaquin said.

"It was okay."

Joaquin looked across the pool and said, "Olivia, huh?" In response, Caleb just took a drink of beer.

"Be careful, *čhiyé*. I hear she's a man-eater." Joaquin wasn't joking.

"Yeah? Well, here's hoping." Caleb laughed hollowly.

"Hey, are you all right?" Joaquin asked with concern. "You've got us all worried, ever since you broke up with Sara."

A split second of pain registered in Caleb's eyes at the sound of her name, but he quickly disguised it as boredom.

"No reason to worry, Quin. I'm fine." He sloshed the nearly empty beer can in front of Joaquin's face and grinned unconvincingly. Olivia returned with a beer for her and a fresh one for Caleb.

"Hi, Quin," she smiled. "Good show tonight."

"Yeah, hi, Olivia." Joaquin stood to leave. "Well, I gotta go."

"Was it something I said?" Olivia asked, as Joaquin walked away.

"Nah," Caleb answered as he took the beer out of her hand. "He just wanted to talk to me for a sec."

A few people came over to talk with the friendly Olivia. Some of them were hoping to make headway with Caleb, but didn't get very far; he was in such a recalcitrant mood. Olivia tried to engage Caleb in small talk and was only minimally successful. They sat there for about an hour, Caleb going through beer like he had a quota to meet.

He took a last swallow and rose to his feet, swaying slightly.

"I'm turning in," he looked down at Olivia, held out his hand and said, "Let's go." She smiled and, arm in arm, they walked into the hotel lobby. Joaquin watched them go and shook his head. There was going to be trouble. Getting involved with the road crew was never a good idea.

CHAPTER 25

OLIVIA

Caleb managed to get the key into his hotel room door somehow. The lock seemed to him to keep moving. Finally swinging the door open, he clicked on the light, bowed at the waist and motioned Olivia to go in. She giggled and stepped through. Caleb followed her and closed the door behind him. He walked up to her and, without a word, grabbed her and began kissing her.

Olivia responded to him, hoping something like this would happen. Not only was Caleb attractive, but he was the one in charge. Being next to him gave her implied power, which was exactly what she wanted.

His kisses were intense, urgent, desperate even. She spurred him on, encouraging him with her hands, her lips, her body.

"Wait a minute, lover," she whispered after a moment. Caleb drew back to look at her. "Give me a second to freshen up," she told him. He nodded and dropped his hands from her body. She walked into

the bathroom and shut the door.

While she was gone, Caleb turned off the light and switched on the lamp by the bed. He turned on the radio and grabbed another beer, walked back over to the bed, sat down and pulled his boots off. When Olivia returned from the bathroom, he was sitting at the head of the bed, drinking. She sat down next to him.

"Where were we?" she purred as she leaned in to kiss him. He sat his beer on the nightstand and turned the lamp off. Grabbing the back of her hair, he gently pulled her head back and began kissing her throat. She sat back up and began unbuttoning his shirt. Caleb drunkenly watched her fingers undo the buttons in the dim half-light. He knew he should be enjoying this, but it felt flat and empty. Olivia pulled his shirt off and then took hers off as well. Within a few minutes, a pile of clothes was beside the bed and the two of them were tangled up together in sheets.

The radio had been playing "new artists" all evening. The DJ announced a new song by Sara Bradford that had been recorded live at one of her concerts. "*Lakota Man*" began playing, with its heart-breaking lyrics and haunting melody. Sara's beautiful voice filled the room. Caleb stopped kissing Olivia and jerked his head up like he'd been stung.

"What is it, lover?" Olivia asked, lying beneath him.

"Sshhh," he ordered. He hadn't heard this song before. Caleb rolled over on his side and, removing his hand from her breast, pushed his hair back behind his ear. He didn't touch Olivia again. The words — *his* woman's words — blistered his conscience, one after the other. The sound of Sara's pain hung in the air. She was talking to him as clearly as if she was sitting next to him. "*What are you doing?*"

OLIVIA

At the end of the song, Olivia said, "What a sad song! Lakota Man." She looked at him, "Aren't you Lakota?"

Caleb rolled over on his back and, misunderstanding her, murmured, "I used to be." She put her hand on his chest and snuggled against him.

"Come here," she cooed.

"Sorry," Caleb didn't look at her as he sat up, "but you've got to go."

"What? Caleb, let's at least finish what we started." Olivia was confused.

"Go!" he ordered as he turned on the lamp.

"But..."

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, picked up her blouse and threw it towards her. "Get out! Now!"

Olivia lay across the bed to reach the rest of her clothes on the floor. She grabbed them and went into the bathroom, hurt, confused, and angry. When she came out, she walked over to the door and turned to face him. He didn't look at her. Instead, he was staring at a locket dangling from its chain tangled in his fingers. It twinkled in the soft lamplight as it slowly twirled. He didn't hear Olivia leave.

The next day, back on the bus again, the band was headed for another city, another show. Joaquin sat down next to Caleb, who looked hung over

"I guess you heard about Olivia," Joaquin said.

"No. What about her?" Caleb's voice was flat. His head was pounding.

"She quit this morning." Caleb just stared out the bus window. "What happened last night?" Joaquin asked. "I saw you two leave the party together."

"Nothing happened, *misúŋ*. Absolutely nothing." Caleb leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. This conversation was over.

* * *

Matthew stood behind his keyboard and introduced the next song. "Alright, people, we've got a new one for you tonight." The audience broke into applause, excited that they got to be the first to hear a new Black Wolf song. "It's called '*Only One Man*.' Let us know if you like it."

Joaquin clicked them off with his drumsticks in a slow, heavy beat; Jay met him with a soulful bass tab. They played the intro, Caleb laying down an intricate lead. The beat was grinding, going straight to the root of heartbreak blues.

Caleb stood right behind his mike in the middle of the stage. His long black hair gleamed blue under the stage lights, his guitar hung low against his body. He leaned into his microphone and his smoky voice rolled through the room like a midnight mist on a Louisiana bayou.

Let – the – winds – hooooowl. (ba-dum) let 'em blow.
 Storm – and – rain – coooome (ba-dum) then they go.
 You – love – forever – sooooo (ba-dum) it's alright
 I – can – take – the daaarrrk (ba-dum) with your light.

His vocals started each verse angry and loud. But, as Caleb worked

OLIVIA

through the lyrics, each verse ended almost in a whisper – or a low growl – or maybe it was a moan of pain. He stepped back, his eyes closed, his fingers finding their way among the frets, up and down the strings, bending and blistering notes.

He once again leaned in to the mike. Matthew met him for the chorus, taking the harmony.

On – ly – one – man.
Just – one – heart. (ba-dum)
On – ly – one – shot
At – this – life. (ba-dum-dum-dum)
I – won't – go – on
With – out – you. (ba-dum)
Not – giv – ing – up
With – no – fight. (ba-dum-dum-dum)
Not giving up with no fight.

Caleb looked into the audience. Several people had their eyes closed, their heads bobbing to the beat. A few others were watching him intently, trying to study his work. He could see cell phones raised, connected to who-knew-where on the other end. Jay walked over to him, his long fingers thumping the bass. They played side-by-side for a few bars before Jay went back to his mike.

I'm – a – lone – heeerre (ba-dum) in this bed
Talk – ing – to – yooouuu (ba-dum) in my head
Love – you; – need – yooouuu. (ba-dum) Where'd you go?
I – can't – breathe – juuusst (ba-dum) so you know.

They broke for Caleb's guitar solo. He took a few steps to the left of his mike and let his fingers fly. His face was scrunched up, his eyes

closed in concentration. He was lost to the people watching him, lost to the world, lost to everything but the music pouring out of his soul and into the guitar.

The strings sang of his pain, of his longing, of his being completely lost without Sara — his woman, his baby, his life. Where was she now? How would he ever make it without her? Why couldn't he find his way back to her? His heart cried — the guitar cried for him; it's music, like tears, washed over the audience. *Where is my woman? Where is my woman? Where is my woman?*

Tears fell from his eyes and he didn't try to stop them. Let them see him weep. He didn't care. She was gone and he was lost. Why would he care what *they* thought? His world was over. All he could do was to try to play the pain away.

Matthew looked across the stage to Jay, worried. Caleb's solo kept going. He didn't seem ready to quit any time soon. Jay looked at Quin behind the drums, but Quin just shrugged his shoulders. He didn't know what to do, either. Jay finally walked over to Caleb and stood behind him.

"Come back to us, *čhiyé*," he said in Caleb's ear. Caleb heard somebody from far away. Were they talking to him? He opened his eyes and realized that he was on stage. For a moment, he had forgotten that.

"Caleb!" Jay said sharply.

Caleb twisted around to look at him. "What?"

"We need to wrap this up, don't ya think?" Jay looked at the tears on Caleb's face and realized that Caleb's state of mind was even worse than he thought.

“Oh, okay.” Caleb gave the high sign to Quin and Matthew and they met at the third verse.

On – ly – fools – woouuld (ba-dum) walk away
And I’m – not – lea – viiinng, (ba-dum) not today
Not – for – ever – sooooo, (ba-dum) here I am.
I – love – you – giiiirrl. (ba-dum) Understand?

They played the chorus through twice, with a break in the bridge for a short bass solo. As Caleb and Matthew sang the last line one more time, Joaquin drummed them out. They all met at the end with a cacophony of lead and bass guitars, keyboard and high hats. The audience broke into a wave of wild applause, whistles and shouts. They didn’t realize that they had just witnessed a meltdown.

The brothers played two more songs and then hurried Caleb off the stage. For the first time, there was no encore. They got him back to the bus and got the bus pointed back to Austin.

“I’m worried sick about you, Caleb,” Matthew said, once they were on the road. “What happened up there tonight?”

“Nothing. I just played a little long. That’s all.” He shrugged it off.

“No. You weren’t just playing a little long,” Jay challenged him. “You were gone — in tears.”

“So? The music gets to me every now and then. Doesn’t it get to you sometimes?”

“Caleb,” Matthew shook his head, “we’re canceling the other shows and getting you home.”

“No! We’ve got three more and we’re gonna make them. I don’t

want the rep of being a cancellation band. Not now. We've worked too hard to let that happen."

"Forget it!" Jay argued back. "We're taking you home. Or else you're gonna crack up in the middle of a stage somewhere."

"I'm fine!" he protested. "Do *not* cancel any shows. I mean it!" He stood up and got a beer.

"And that's another thing," Matthew said. "You're drinking too much."

"Leave me alone!" Caleb growled. "I know when I've had too much. This is my first beer tonight."

"I'm not just talking about tonight, *čhiyé*, and you know it."

Caleb didn't say anything to that. He only raised the can to his mouth and defiantly took a large swig, staring at Matthew as he did.

"Okay, I'll say it," Quin jumped in to the discussion. "Would you call her, for crying out loud? Just pick up the phone and call!" He didn't have to say who.

"Go to hell!" Caleb slammed the can down on the counter, beer sloshing out of the top. "All of you!" He stormed to the back of the bus. Why wouldn't they leave him alone?

* * *

An hour later, Caleb returned and apologized to his brothers. He finally got them to agree not to cancel the next three concerts in exchange for taking some down time just as soon as the shows were over. When they threatened to tell their father about their concerns, he begged them not to. He would tell Pops the next time he saw him. This wasn't something to be discussed over the phone.

Matthew wondered, before the next concert even began, just how good a deal they had made. They were headed to Birmingham. Caleb was quiet, but seemed to be doing all right on the trip there. An hour before the show, though, he started drinking. Matthew watched in concern as Caleb threw an empty away and immediately grabbed a fresh beer.

"You wanna slow down a little?" Matthew asked.

"I'm fine."

"I hope so. I don't want to have to carry you onto the stage."

"I *said* I'm fine," Caleb repeated belligerently.

"Okay." Matthew threw his hands up. He didn't want to start fighting this close to going on stage.

They made it through the show, through Caleb's solos, and even made it through an encore. They piled into the bus and headed for their next stop — Little Rock.

In Little Rock, Caleb started drinking even earlier than before and showed up backstage "feeling no pain."

"Hey, *misúñ*," he slurred and threw his arm around Quin's shoulder, "You got any *chicas* lined up for tonight after the show? 'Cuz if you've got any extras, send one my way, would ya?"

Quin stepped away from his brother and put a hand on his shoulder to steady him. "Sorry, Caleb, no *chicas* tonight." He gave Matthew a high sign.

"Coffee," he said when Matthew approached. "And lots of it." Matthew took one look at Caleb and frowned.

"What are we going to do with you?" he asked. "You can't keep

doing this. Your playing is starting to get sloppy."

"So?!" Caleb let himself be led to the coffee pot and took the cup that Matthew offered him.

"What? Am I supposed to drink this?"

"Yes."

"And then will you leave me alone?"

"Just drink it, Caleb," Matthew ordered.

Somehow they made it through that show, but their reviews were becoming more and more dismal as Caleb deteriorated both personally and professionally.

Back in Austin, Melissa sat in her office and read the press. "Oh, dear," she murmured smugly. "Looks like Caleb Black Wolf is having some difficulties. I wonder what happened?"

The third show was in Tulsa. The three brothers decided to take turns guarding Caleb before the show and their plan worked. He was sober — grouchy, but sober. His playing improved. But, when he walked off stage after the encore, he suddenly felt tired — as though he was a balloon and someone had let out the air. He got on the bus and went straight to his bunk, where he fell into an exhausted sleep. When he finally woke up, they were almost home.

CHAPTER 26

POPS

Caleb wanted desperately to get off the road — away from the business. He made a beeline for his folks. They knew, through Joaquin, that Caleb and Sara had broken up, but that's all they knew. Their sons' CD was climbing quickly in the music charts and Mary Black Wolf was worried about how they would handle it. Too much fame too fast had destroyed many people. She knew that having Sara in his life had kept Caleb grounded. With her gone, Mary was afraid for her son. As soon as he walked in the house, she looked into his eyes and knew he was in trouble.

Caleb spent most of his time walking the fields behind his parents' place with Mato ("the Spitzoty"), or shut up in his room, with mournful guitar music filling the house. He had lost all appetite for performing and just wanted to be left alone. He cut down on his drinking and, as his thinking cleared up, he felt ashamed of his behavior on the road — particularly with Olivia. Even though they

hadn't slept together, they might as well have. That had been his express intention. His brothers hadn't said much to him about her. He cut them off whenever they tried. But, he could read the concern and disapproval in their eyes.

On his third day home, his father came and sat in the living room with him.

"So, Son, what are your plans?" Jim asked as he took a sip of hot coffee.

"Hmmm. Good question, Pops." Caleb reached down to pet Mato's ears. "I honestly don't know. My heart's not into anything right now."

"Your heart is with Sara," his father gently corrected him.

Caleb snorted, "Lotta good *that* does."

"Caleb," Jim sat his coffee mug down and rested his elbows on his knees. "I don't know what happened between you two, but I can guess. I've seen some of the pictures in those tabloids. I can understand how a woman would be upset by them. You can't have pictures of other women kissing you and expect *your* woman to stand for it."

"Pops, I was set up!" Caleb protested.

"And Sara knows this?"

When Caleb didn't answer, "No, she doesn't," Jim answered for him. "You've got a temper, Son. You've always had one, even when you were little. I imagine that you let it get the best of you. Instead of talking things through, you got mad and ran out."

"*What*," Caleb thought to himself with astonishment, "*Were you there?*"

"I'd also guess that you haven't talked to her since."

"No, Pops, but that's because of the locket." Caleb explained about its return.

"And you're letting that stop you from talking with her?" Jim shook his head at his son's behavior.

"Son, when a woman has been hurt, her man needs to be strong for both of them. You have to battle whatever it is that is hurting her. If that is someone else interfering — or her fear — or your pride — *you* have to defeat it."

Caleb sat silently contemplating his father's advice. He finally spoke again, looking sadly at his father. "Pops, there's more. I screwed up."

Jim looked intently at his son; saw the remorse, the self-blame in his eyes. "Another woman?" he guessed. "And this woman was...?"

"A one night stand, Pops. Nobody. A mistake. We were in bed together when a song of Sara's came on the radio. I got the woman out of my room before anything more serious happened." Caleb continued looking at his father, shaking his head. "I don't get it. If Sara and I are over, why do I feel so bad — like I've betrayed her?"

"Because you and Sara aren't over, not in your heart. Son, you've fallen into one of the oldest traps man has ever set for himself — thinking that another woman can solve the problems you're having with your own woman. It never works."

Caleb shook his head again. "Pops, I've been such an idiot," he said after a few moments. Jim just nodded and picked his coffee up.

* * *

It was Sara's last show of her tour. First thing in the morning, she would be on a plane headed for home. The tour had both exhilarated and exhausted her. Sara had bittersweet feelings about this last show, but she was ready to go home. At least she thought she was. Not having Caleb to go home to upset her. She didn't know how she was going to handle it. But, she'd have to cross that bridge when she came to it. First, she had a show to give.

Sara went through her set, performing flawlessly, giving her audience the best she had to give. Her fan base had grown and her CD sales were increasing. Definite crowd-favorites had begun to emerge and, when she began to play them, she almost didn't need to sing. The audiences were singing them with and for her. She loved that. She loved her fans. The final song was sung. The final bow was taken. The show was over, the tour done.

Once Sara left the stage, there was a car waiting to drive her back to her hotel, where a party was being held for her, in honor of the tour's completion. When she arrived at the hotel, she and Denise walked across the hotel lobby towards the ballroom where a crowd had already gathered. She could hear the music and laughter from the hotel doors.

Congratulators and well-wishers, photographers and journalists immediately surrounded her. She was grateful that her publicist and business manager were there to help her handle all of them. After an hour of being pounded on and grinned at and blinded by flash bulbs, she walked over to Denise.

"I've got a headache. I'm going to my room to get some aspirin. If I'm not down in half an hour, please make my excuses for me and I'll see you in the morning."

“Okay,” Denise said. “Feel better.”

Sara escaped to the elevators and, getting off on her floor, made her way down the hall to her room. She turned the last corner and stopped. Leaning his back against her door, head down, hair covering the side of his face, was Caleb, looking like he had been waiting for a while. He heard her and raised his head. She took a few steps towards him, wondering why he was there.

He stood up and turned towards her.

“Sara?” He looked into her eyes, searching for a welcome. All he saw was confusion.

“Hi.” She wanted to throw herself into his arms, cover him in kisses, but instead she unlocked her door. “Do you want to come in?”

“Yeah, please.” He followed her in and closed the door behind him.

“I’ll be right with you,” she said, stepping into the bathroom in search of some aspirin. She came back out with them and some water. After taking the aspirin, she sat the glass down on the table and turned towards Caleb, who was still standing by the door.

“I’m surprised to see you.”

“I guess I should have called first,” he said, “but I was afraid that you’d tell me not to come.”

She kicked off her shoes. “Have a seat.” She motioned to one of the chairs as she sat on the edge of the bed. “So, why *did* you come?”

“I wanted to find out why you sent the locket back. Why you ended it so abruptly without us talking things through.”

“Why I sent the locket back?” she echoed in astonished confusion.

Walking across the room, she pulled an envelope from a bureau drawer. "Here."

He took it from her, pulled the note out of the envelope and read it.

She plopped down on the bed. "I got that the same day you left me in Philly. You were so angry with me when you left that ..."

"What?!" He looked up at her, horrified. "Sara, I didn't send this."

"If you didn't send it, who did?"

"The same person who set me up with the flowers and the tickets and everything else that went wrong between us."

"And who would that be?"

"Melissa Guthrie."

"Are you sure? Why?" Sara was so confused that her head was spinning.

"Stop just a minute. Back up." Caleb stood up. "You returned the locket because you thought I had broken up with you. But I never did. Which means that you never did. Which means ..." He broke into a broad grin. "...which means that you're still my woman. Right?"

She looked up at him, following his logic. It hit her about the same time that it did him. "Oh, Lakota Man, I am *so* still your woman!"

"Then come here, baby." He held his arms out and just about got knocked backwards as she jumped into them. He held her so tight, she was afraid her ribs would crush, and, yet, it wasn't tight enough for either of them. He covered her face with kisses. She couldn't decide if she was laughing or crying. She was in his arms again — finally in his arms again.

"Oh, Caleb, I love you so much and I've missed you so much and, and ..."

"And I've got a sugar shortage that you're *never* gonna get rid of," he laughed.

"Maybe not, but I'm going to have fun trying."

"You wanna start working on that now?" he teased as he sat down on the bed and pulled her on his lap.

She smiled happily into his dark-chocolate eyes and began with a soft, sweet kiss. "That's one," she whispered. Kissing him again, she whispered, "That's two."

After the fifth one, he moaned. "You're killing me, woman! Let me see if I can't speed things up a little." He undressed her quickly. She laughed at his impatience, but she understood it, too. He laid her back on the bed and, after undressing himself, he lay beside her.

"I can't believe that you're finally here with me," he said. Then he began to make love to her, with his lips, his tongue, his hands. "I nearly lost my mind without you. I dreamt about you so many times. I would be standing in a long hallway filled with doors. I'd open each one looking for you, but you were never behind any of them."

"Oh, Lakota Man. You found me. I'm right here. I won't let you go again."

"You'd better not. Not ever." Then he quit talking. He was too busy with more important matters.

CHAPTER 27

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

“Caleb?” she asked quietly, lying beside him, covered by only a sheet.

“Yes, baby?”

“Why would Melissa send that note?”

Caleb sat up, resting his back against the headboard, and pulled her to him. He explained about Melissa’s overtures in Austin and his rejection of them. The elaborate placement of the photographs in the tabloids floored Sara.

“She went to all that trouble just to break us up?”

“Yeah. The photos and the flowers and the tickets — all her. When I went back to Austin from Philly, I went straight to her office. We

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had quite a showdown. She admitted everything, then I fired her. I guess she sent that message to you about the time I was pulling out of the parking lot.”

“But why? If she did all that because she liked you ...”

“Revenge. Power. Vanity. Some combination of them all. And she didn’t really “like” me. She just wanted me as a notch on her bedpost.”

“Oh. So, we’ve spent all this time apart because of her.”

“Afraid so.” He looked down to see Sara frowning.

“Then what are we going to do about it?” Sara ran her hand across his chest as she thought about their options.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it.”

“Okay, Lakota Man. You think about it. I have a sugar shortage to work on. Remember?” She moved herself on top of him and began kissing his throat and chest, running her hands across his arms, sides and thighs. He closed his eyes, enjoying her attention, her caresses.

“Lucky for you, I can multitask,” he said after a few minutes. “I can think and do this at the same time.” She giggled in delight as he grabbed her and rolled her back over for more of his love.

* * *

She was snuggled up against him, almost asleep in his arms, when another question came to mind.

“Caleb?”

“Yes, baby?” he murmured sleepily.

"Why did you come back now? I mean, why not sooner — or later, for that matter?"

"Hmmm, good question." He rolled over on his side and rested his head in his hand.

"When I thought you had broken it off, I started drinking way too much. I almost — *almost* — had a one-night stand. But, '*Lakota Man*' came on the radio. I heard your voice and it was like I finally woke up. All I could see was you. All I wanted was you. And you were singing about how much I had hurt you.

"I finally had to face myself. I thought that my anger had destroyed our chance together when I stormed out in Philly. The sorrow, the guilt were unbearable. I died right then listening to your song."

She touched his shoulder, letting him know it was all right.

"My poor brothers," Caleb grimaced. "I put them through hell. I'm surprised that they're still even speaking to me. They tried to talk to me about the drinking and everything, but all I'd do was get mad and drink even more.

"When I told you I went crazy without you, I wasn't joking. I had some kind of meltdown in Memphis, right in the middle of a solo. I couldn't quit playing. I couldn't quit crying."

"What? Oh, honey." Sara looked at him with real concern.

"My brothers pulled me off stage and were ready to throw me in a padded room. They threatened to cancel shows and drag Pops into the middle of everything. I begged them not to and promised them I'd talk to him myself. After that, I drank my way through two shows. I don't remember them too well. I would have done the same for the third, but they took turns sitting on me until it was

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show time.

“When we finally got home, I went straight to Pops’ and spent a few days there, decompressing and doing some hard thinking. I was so lost, Sara. I *never* want to feel that way again.”

“I know, baby. Me, either.”

“Anyway, after the third day there, Pops had a long talk with me. He made a lot of sense. So, once he got me to pull my head out of my — well, you know — I got on the first plane to you, hoping that you would at least talk to me. And that’s why I’m here now.”

“And at least I talked to you,” she smiled.

“Oh, at the very least,” he purred.

“Okay, I think I’m done with questions. You can go to sleep now.”

“Night, baby.” He kissed her once and, putting his hand on her hip, he fell into the best sleep he’d had for a long time.

* * *

The next afternoon, Caleb walked into his house, leading Sara by the hand. Jay turned to look behind him from his place on the couch. He saw her and jumped up, grinning.

“Hi! I am so glad to see *you*!” He grabbed her, giving her a tight bear hug.

“Oh, Jay,” she laughed at his unexpected demonstration, “I’m happy to see you, too.”

“Maybe,” he said as he finally let her go. “But not as happy as me. I promise.” He turned his head to yell towards the hall. “Come a runnin’ y’all! Look who Caleb brought home.”

Matthew was the first one to emerge from the hall. "Oh, man!" he exclaimed. "Where have *you* been?" He hugged Sara with the same ferocity that Jay did.

Quin walked up behind him, put his hand on Matthew's shoulder, and pulled him back. "My turn," he said. He grabbed Sara up and twirled her around. When he put her back down, he covered her cheeks in a dozen, little, quick kisses.

"Don't *ever* leave us alone with him like that again — ever! Our next step was going to be to shoot him — tranq or bullet — either would have been fine." Joaquin fussed at her.

"Hey, hey!" Caleb growled, "don't I get a hello?"

"Oh, yeah. Hello." Matthew glanced over his shoulder at Caleb and then he and Quin escorted Sara to the sofa, sitting on either side of her.

"Well!" Caleb said, pretending to be insulted. "At least now I know where I stand." He walked over to the sofa, grabbed Quin by his arm, pulled him to his feet and quickly sat down in the vacated seat. He put his arm around Sara and grinned.

"That's more better," he announced contentedly.

Sara could only laugh. This homecoming was something she had never expected. "Oh, goodness, I've missed my boys," she smiled.

"I don't know what happened," Matthew said, "but I'm glad that you forgave this old lunkhead."

"I'll tell you what happened." The smile disappeared from Caleb's face as he launched into a recap of the events as he and Sara had pieced them together.

"Melissa Guthrie?" Jay shook his head. She had seemed so profes-

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sional and had done so much good work for their band.

“So, all this time, you two just *thought* you had broken up?” Quin was still trying to connect all the dots. “Man!”

“What are you going to do?” Jay asked.

“I don’t know yet, *misúñ*. But something. I just need to figure it out.”

The next day, Caleb went to the studio to pick up a few things. He hadn’t been there in several weeks, since their CD was finished.

“Hey, Sandee,” he said to the sound engineers as he met her in the hall.

“Caleb. Long time, no see,” she grinned. “You back in town for a while?”

“Yeah. Hopefully. I just dropped by to pick up some things that I left here.”

“Oh, speaking of which,” she snapped her fingers. “Come with me.” She led him to her small office. “I almost forgot about this.” She started looking through a shelf of tapes. “I found this the other day when I was getting your old studio organized. Ah! Here it is.” She pulled a box down and handed it to him.

“Remember when Guthrie came by a few months back and you asked me to set you up in a sound booth so she could listen to your work?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the machine got switched on somehow. I don’t know how. But, it taped that conversation. When I was going through tapes, I found it. It was such an odd conversation that I wondered if I

shouldn't save it and give it to you. You can decide what you want to do with it."

"Where can I listen to it?"

"C'mon." In a matter of minutes, Sandee had him set up and was playing back the tape.

Melissa: *You boys are marvelous, simply marvelous.*

Caleb: *Melissa, what are you doing?*

Melissa: *Just enjoying the view. Oh, please, Caleb, I read your bio. Neither one of us is married, so where's the harm? I can't be the only woman who's ever made a pass at you. A rock musician? Oh, yeah, you know the drill.*

Caleb: *Ms. Guthrie, let's get one thing clear. I might be a rock musician, I might not be married, but I don't play that way.*

Melissa: *But, honey it's being offered to you on a silver platter. I don't understand.*

Caleb: *You don't understand? Then I feel sorry for you. Let's just say not everyone in this business is cheap.*

Melissa: *Who does he think he is? A local guitar player. If I want him, then I'll have him or my name isn't Melissa Guthrie!*

The last sound was that of a door closing.

"Oh, Sandee, this is great! Can I have this?"

"Sure. Take it."

"Make a copy of it, first, though, please."

"Okay."

In a few minutes, Sandee handed him the original and a freshly

burned CD.

"This is Ms. Guthrie's personal Watergate." He waggled the CD in his hand and then leaned down to kiss Sandee's cheek. "Thank you so much."

"You're very welcome," the blushing Sandee said as she watched him leave.

The next afternoon, Caleb was sitting in his attorney's office.

"Mr. Sanderson," he began, "I'm not sure how this works, but I have a problem with a publicist, Melissa Guthrie, and I'm wondering if you can help."

He laid out the chain of events from his side of Mr. Sanderson's massive oak desk and then pulled out the CD.

"This is the conversation that I've just told you about."

After Sanderson listened to it, he leaned back in his chair.

"Well, Caleb," he put the tips of his fingers together contemplatively. "If she ordered the airline tickets or called Sara's hotel, it will show up in her phone records. Using your credit card without your consent to purchase those tickets is enough to land her in serious trouble. Sexual harassment makes it even worse. We won't be able to use this in court," he pointed to the CD, "because it was recorded without her knowledge. But, I think we've got enough evidence already, so that we don't need it."

"So you can do something?"

"Oh, yes. I can do something." Mr. Sanderson's eyes lit up. He lived for things like this. He explained what he had in mind.

"We'll file a lawsuit against her and her company. I have a feeling

though, that she will be more than happy to settle out of court. She won't want her name dragged through the mud or the time and expense of a battle that she knows she will lose."

"I'm not sure I want to go through all of that," Caleb frowned. "What if she decides to fight it and we wind up in some protracted court thing? I just want her to know she can't get away with things like this. She hurt me personally, which affected my band. Our shows weren't as good and our fans knew it."

"Well, then, we could just threaten to sue. Since you were affected publicly, we could demand a public apology in several trade journals."

"Now *that* I like," Caleb nodded. "That would be perfect. Can you set it up?"

"Absolutely. I'll have it started by the end of the week."

The two men rose to their feet, shook hands, and Caleb left.

* * *

It took some time and consulting of attorneys and Melissa kicking and screaming and cursing the day she ever met Caleb Black Wolf. But, the apology eventually happened, in a half-page ad in five different trade journals.

To Whom It May Concern:

Due to bad business practices and poor judgment on my part, I have adversely affected the Black Wolf Band professionally and Caleb Black Wolf personally. I apologize for any and all wrongdoing on my part and hope that the Black Wolf family will pardon my inexcusable behavior.

Melissa Guthrie

CHAPTER 28

THE FLUTE PLAYER

One evening, Sara heard what sounded like flute music outside of her front door.

“What on earth?” she thought, as she walked across the room to open the door.

There stood Caleb, wrapped in a red and black plaid blanket and playing the flute — badly.

“What are you doing?” she laughed when she saw him.

He quit playing and asked, “Can I come in before your neighbors start throwing rocks?”

She pulled him in and closed the door behind him. He laid the flute down on the kitchen table and adjusted the blanket around his shoulders. He then held open the blanket.

“Before you step into my arms,” he said seriously, “there is something you should know.”

"Okay." She was up for anything now.

"This is an old Lakota custom. When a young man stood outside a woman's tepee and played the flute, he was telling her that he loved her. If she came out and stood with him under the blanket, it meant that she loved him, too. If you share my blanket with me, you are accepting my proposal of marriage."

Sara looked at him, her eyes wide with wonder. "Caleb?"

He continued, "Please, Sara, be my woman forever. Let your Lakota Man love you forever. Will you marry me?"

He gestured with his arms, inviting her to step into his embrace. She couldn't stop her tears; she couldn't catch her breath. It took her two steps to reach him, to be tightly held, to be wrapped in his blanket. She looked up at him and saw that he had tears sparkling in the corners of his eyes.

"Yes, yes, yes, Caleb. Oh yes."

As he held her, he could feel her trembling. He looked into her amazing eyes and smiled softly. "I love you, woman. I think from the very first moment that you kissed me, I loved you. You have made me a stronger and a better man. And I will always love you."

He leaned down and kissed her tenderly. She returned his kiss, wishing that she could quit shaking. Caleb removed the blanket, put it next to his flute and then led Sara over to the sofa. She sat down and he pulled a jeweler's box from his pocket. Sitting down next to her, he opened the box, took her hand and slid a ring with two small golden eagle's wings encircling a brilliantly blue sapphire onto her finger. "There," he said. He kissed her hand and then he kissed her.

THE FLUTE PLAYER

“It’s going to be a wild ride, woman. And I wouldn’t take it with anyone but you.” They both laughed, their hearts too full of joy to do anything else.

THE END

ISBN 141206866-5



9 781412 068666

TRAFFORD
PUBLISHING

ISBN 1412068666
9 781412 068666

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